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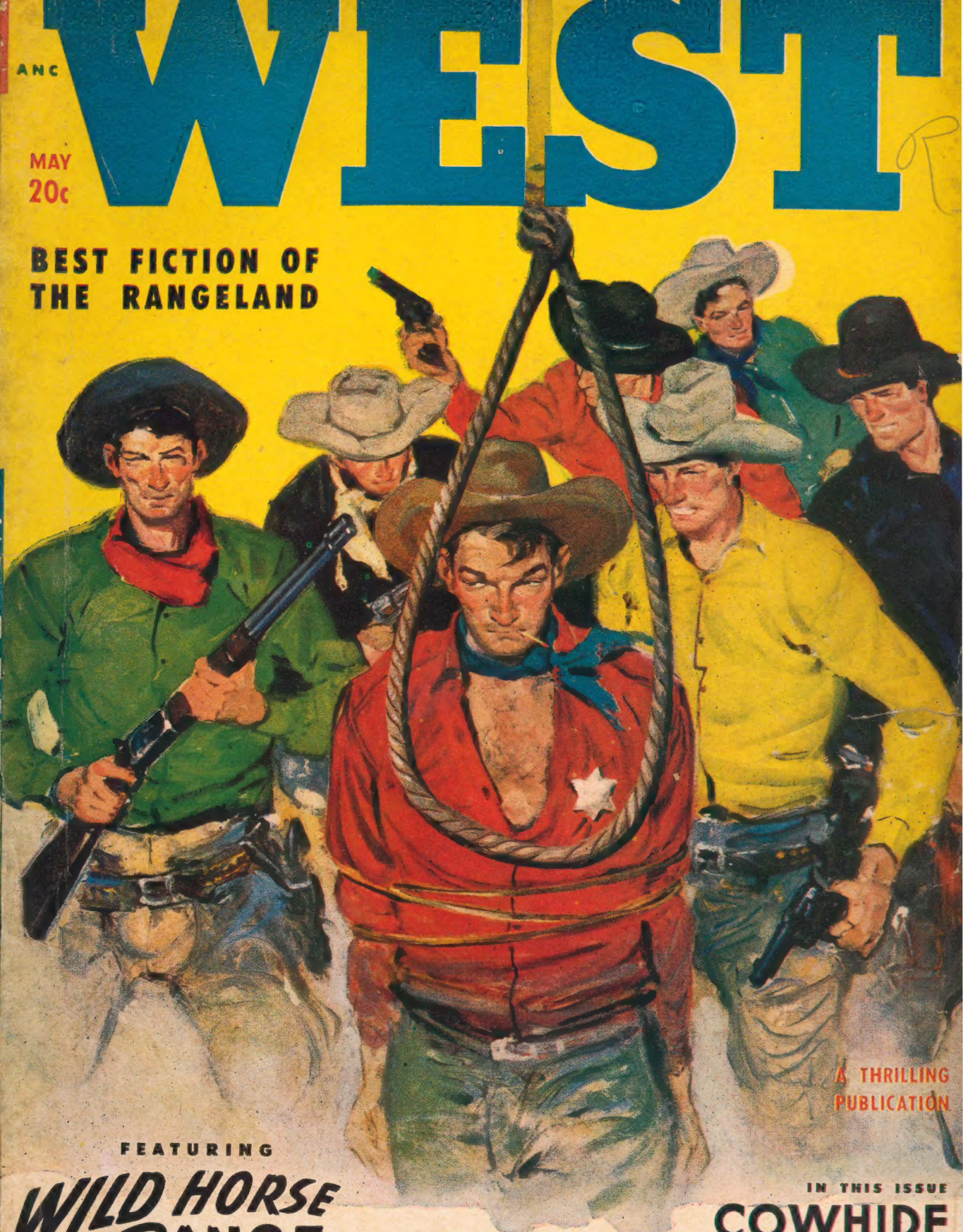

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WILD HORSE RANGE

A NEW COMPLETE NOVEL
By B. M. BOWER

IN THIS ISSUE

COWHIDE MASQUERADE

A SANDSTONE STORY
By FRANCIS H. AMES

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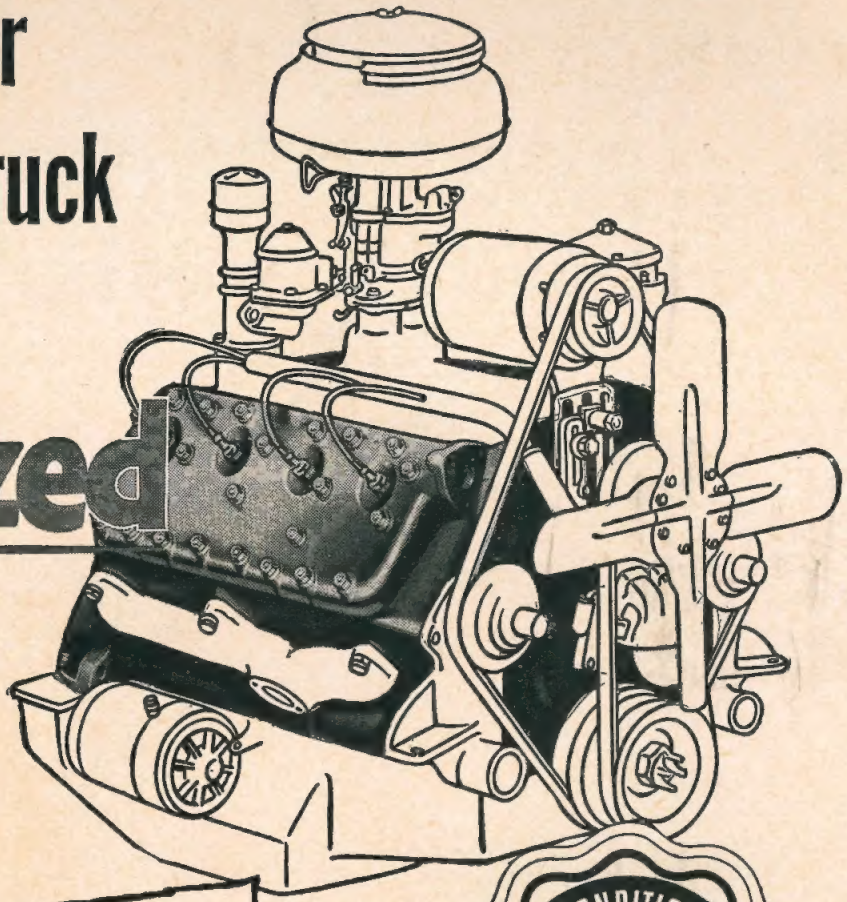

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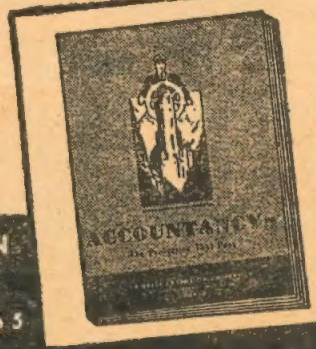

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WEST

Vol. 73, No. 1—May, 1950 A THRILLING PUBLICATION TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR

COMPLETE NOVEL

WILD HORSE RANGE

By B. M. Bower

Rowdy Vaughan and Pink Perkins swiftly stir up a steaming stew of red-hot r... when they suddenly come to suspec... tied in with an outfit of rustling ...

SHORT STORIES

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SHOTGUNS AND DUCKS by John A. Thompson 91
Another in our series of special features on Western game and guns

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The true story of a giant grizzly bear which suddenly went berserk!

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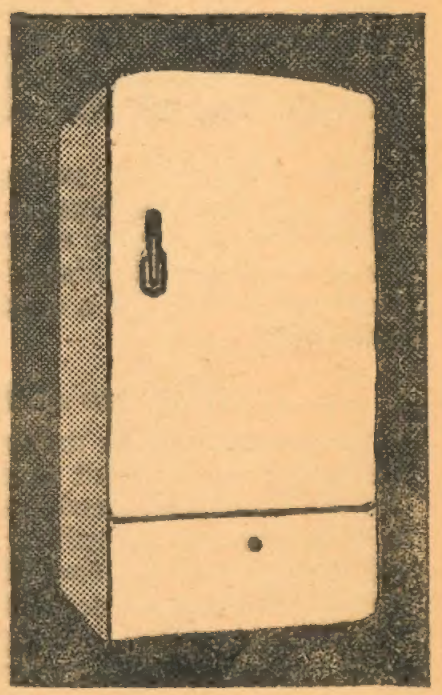

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GREETINGS, waddies, pull up the old chuck wagon and once more we will try and dish out the latest in range and rodeo gossip. The ranges are continually being cut down, but cattle raising goes on all the time, but under newer and more modern methods. The production of cattle must continue as there are millions more to feed than there were back in the days when cattle ran wild over vast unfenced areas.

Rodeos are forging ahead all the time. There were more than six hundred rodeos during the 1949 season and there was an estimated combined prize list of more than two million dollars. Rodeo prizes are three or four and in some instances even five times bigger than they were at the same rodeos back thirty years ago, but there are more rodeo fans in the country now than there were then, and they pay a higher admission price, too.

The 1949 rodeo season was a very good one, not the biggest in the history of the sport but good enough not to complain about and it finished with the sport in about as healthy a condition as it has ever been.

Winners of 1949

On account of so many rodeos working under their point award system the Rodeo Cowboys' Association has taken a long time in compiling the points of all contestants for the 1949 season and were late in announcing the winners of the season's championship battles. This is because the arena secretaries of some of the rodeos do not send in their results until sometimes months after their rodeo is over.

Each rodeo that is approved by the R.C.A. must have its prize lists approved, or members of the R.C.A. are forbidden to enter it. Approved rodeos automatically become members of the R.C.A. point award system, while only the member rodeos of the International Rodeo Association participate in the point award system of that organization. The I.R.A. is an organization of rodeo committees or managers and there are about 96 rodeos throughout the country that are members, while the R.C.A. is what might be termed a union of rodeo contestants, and all rodeos whose prize lists are OK'd by the R.C.A. participate in their point award system, even those who are members of the I.R.A.

Each organization awards championship titles based upon the number of points won by the contestants at member rodeos throughout the season. The ratio for each point in both organizations is the same, one point for each dollar in prize money won, except that it is the original posted prize that counts with the I.R.A. as they do not give any points for that part of the purse made up of added entrance fees while the R.C.A. does. Therefore if the prize money won by a contestant in an event is $1500.00 and $500.00 of that is made up of added entrance fees, if the rodeo is a member of the I.R.A. the contestant in the point award system of that organization receives only 1000 points, while in the R.C.A. he would receive 1500 points.

Each organization awards approximately $10,000 in cash prizes along

(Continued on Page 8)

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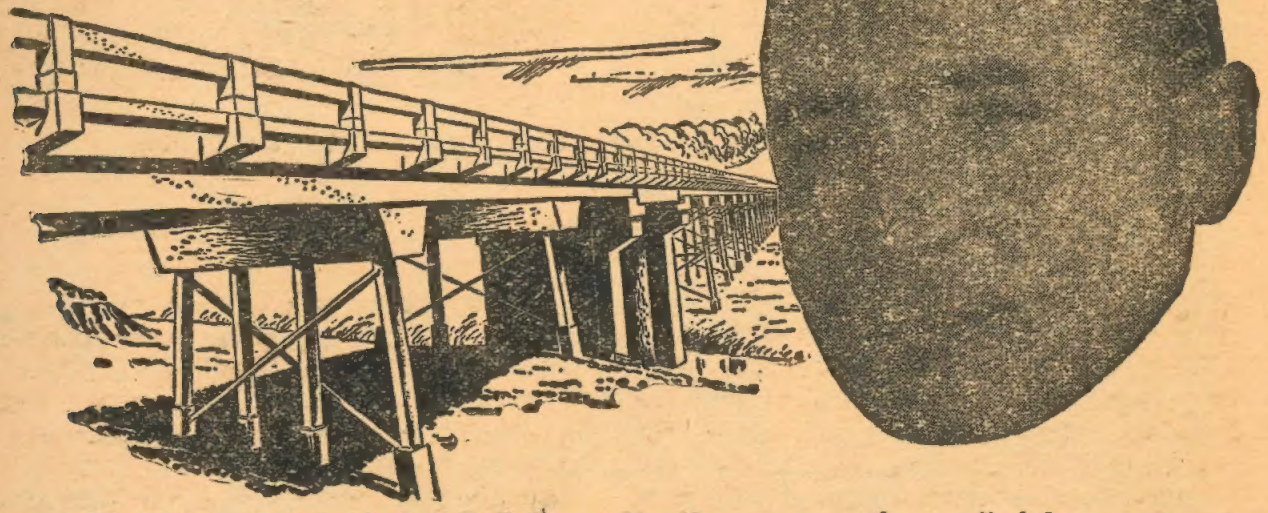

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

with the titles at the end of the season, together with numerous trophies.

Cowboy Champs

Winners of the 1949 championship titles in the Rodeo Cowboys' Association, as now officially named, are as follows:

All around champion: Jim Shoulders, Tulsa, Okla., who piled up 21,495 points, which means that he won that many dollars in purses. Bill Linderman, of Red Lodge, Mont., was second with 20,680 points; Gene Rambo, of Shandon, Calif., was third with 19,494 points.

Steer Wrestling Champion: Bill McGuire, Fort Worth, Texas.

Bareback Bronc Riding Champion: Jack Buschbaum, Cassville, Wisconsin.

Bull Riding Champion: Harry Tompkins, Peekskill, N. Y.

Calf Roping Champion: Troy Fort, Lovington, New Mexico.

Saddle Bronc Riding Champion: Casey Tibbs, Fort Pierre, South Dakota.

Steer Roping Champion: Shoate Webster, Nowata, Oklahoma.

The Grand National

The Grand National Stock Show and Rodeo, which was held in the Cow Palace in San Francisco, and which ran from October 28th to November 6th, was the last show on the list of the I.R.A. and therefore was the grand championship show. The I.R.A. officials had all the points of the contestants compiled for the season up to the time of the opening of the show, and all they had to do was to add the points won by the contestants, as they won prize money at the show, and as soon as the finals were over it took but a few minutes to figure the champions of the season and award the titles and trophies.

Gene Rambo of Shandon, California, was the star of the Grand National, winning approximately $4,500.00 in prize money, winning the all-around championship of the show by scoring more points at the show than any other contestant and also winning the sea-

(Continued on page 123)

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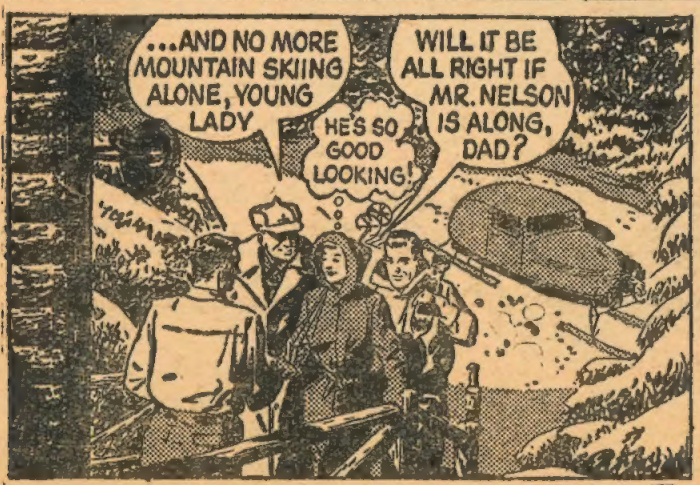
LATER AT HEADQUARTERS
SHE'S PERFECTLY OKAY...JUST TIRED. WE'LL BE DOWN ABOUT DARK ON THE SNOW "CAT"
YOUR DAUGHTER IS IN SAFE HANDS. NELSON'S ONE OF OUR BEST MEN



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Rowdy Vaughan and Pink Perkins stir up a stew of range trouble when they suspect that they've tied in with a rustler outfit!

WILD HORSE RANGE

CHAPTER I

Crooked Money

HIS name was Percy Cadwallader Perkins. But there were few alive who knew that jaw-breaking total and fewer still who dared call him by any part of it. To the cowboys on both sides the Canadian border he was simply "Pink."

"Wonderful rodeo weather," Pink said glumly, shoving back the

A Novel by B. M. BOWER

damp yellow curls which escaped from under his Stetson. "There's gold in them hills and here we are sittin' on the mesa. Cuss an outfit that's too cheap to give its best riders time off to ride into town!"

Rowdy Vaughan, twenty-eight years old, six-feet-one of handsome, dark-complexioned, bony cowpuncher, grinned as he rolled a cigarette.

"Quit beefin' and let's see about that bronc. You're supposed to be working—remember?"

A handsome blue roan cropped the grass at the edge of a water-hole on the flat below, oblivious of the two riders. The mists of an autumn dawn swirled about the bluffs, channeling the sun's first slanting rays into golden bars of light. In the distance, the bustling settlement of Fort Calgary, which housed the delights about which Pink was grieving, was completely hidden.

PINK gave the roan a resentful look and turned nearly as red as the flashy neckerchief which had originally earned him his nickname.

"There's easier ways to make a dollar," he grumbled. "But I'll catch your horse for you, Mr. Vaughan. You just stay here and brood on the fact that the brand you're riding for will give you no time off from your job, but also rates a stranger named Conroy as top rider for the outfit."

Vaughan seemed unperturbed. At twenty-eight he had a level-headed ability to see both sides of a story—and a loyalty—which older men might envy.

"That roan will be gone in two shakes," he warned.

"I'll get him," Pink snorted. "Remember, this ranch carries two experts on its payroll."

He side-slipped his buckskin pony down the trail, approaching so carefully that the roan did not raise his head until Pink was twenty yards away and coming fast. Pink shook out a narrow loop. It sped forward, flat and true and circled the roan's neck in a perfect "hooley-ann."

The buckskin set himself for the roan's wild dash for freedom. But the dash never came. The bronc jerked once as the rope settled around its neck, then turned its head to stare at its captor and went on placidly chewing. The buckskin nearly sat down on its haunches in surprise. And Pink, with all his weight flung back, rolled ungracefully into the dust.

Vaughan rode up, choking with mirth. Pink gave him a sour look, dusting himself off.

"What's wrong with this critter?" Pink demanded. He ran practised hands over the animal's body. "Look here. He's a gol-darned brand book all by himself."

Vaughan nodded. "Changed hands four times, yet gentle as a lamb. Why should anyone want to get rid of him?"

Pink snorted. "I'd say someone borrowed him south of the border and ran him over the line here into Canada. Then found it a mite too much trouble to take him back to the States. And you know what? The last ten broomtails we caught here on Horseshoe Bar range came out of the same cup of sugar!"

Vaughan's face was serious. "Reckon the boss should know about this," he said.

"How do you know he doesn't?" Pink countered.

Thirty minutes later, they walked in rather unexpectedly on Luke Bridger, range boss of the Horseshoe Bar. In front of him on the long table in the ranchhouse parlor, money was stacked in three impressive piles. It was being divided amongst three men who didn't look as if they should be carrying that much.

Rowdy Vaughan took notice of the three—Ben Tucker, "Hoss" Wallaby and Samson Wilkes.

"That's a lot of cash for thirty-a-month hands, Luke," Rowdy Vaughan said bluntly.

The hands did not ordinarily speak this brusquely to Luke Bridger. The gold chain on his vest, the thick cigar and walrus mustaches marked him as a

man of substance and authority, to be treated with respect. Yet curiously, he failed to take offense.

"It ain't theirs, Rowdy," he said. "The ranch is spreading a little money around to buy broncs." Then, waving a hand toward the trio, "Go on, boys. It's gettin' late and Rowdy will excuse you."

"Better hold 'em, Luke," Vaughan said evenly. "They may want to give that money back after you answer two

ROWDY VAUGHAN

or three questions for me and Pink."

Bridger's eyes narrowed. "What's proddin' you, Rowdy? You and Pink beginnin' to feel underpaid?"

"Rough string riders get the same pay on any spread," Vaughan replied. "Trouble is there's no rough string on the Horseshoe Bar. Pink roped our tenth stray this morning. Gentle as a kitten. Branded too—seems like every one but the Horseshoe Bar had a mark on him. Either you're buying from the wrong people or we've got horse-catnip growing around our water-holes to encourage stray four-legged visitors. There's also another possible solution, but I'd like you to tell me it ain't so. Which is it, Luke?"

Bridger was having trouble with his breathing. His color had also risen to uncomfortable shades. But if he was about to speak he was sharply interrupted by the high tenor of Pink Perkins.

"Keep your hand clear of your gun, Sam Wilkes!"

Vaughan got quietly to his feet. "I reckon we've got our answer, Luke," he said.

"Don't be a fool, Rowdy," Bridger snapped. "Any man would pull a gun for that insinuation. I'm hoping you've got an apology."

"I have, if you've got an explanation." He jabbed a finger at the piles of greenbacks. "You don't make that kind of money just breeding horses!"

Bridger met his eyes. "Rowdy, I've played it square with you. I work here like everybody else. Horses are shipped to me from a dozen auctions in the territory. I breed others. I don't buy 'em, I sell 'em. We may gamble some, but we're not horse thieves!"

Vaughan nodded. "That's what I wanted, Luke, your word. Now Pink and I can leave peaceful. It's your problem to find out who's putting you in the middle of this deal." He turned, motioning to Pink.

"See you in Calgary, men," Pink said. "And you'd better hand back that dinero!"

The door slammed behind them. Sam Wilkes made a movement to follow. But Bridger checked him.

"That's out of our line, Wilkes," he said. "This is a job for Harry Conroy."

AFTER leaving the Horseshoe Bar, Pink Perkins and Rowdy Vaughan rode straight to Calgary. Now they were free to enjoy town life as much as they liked. Luke Bridger's explanations hadn't taken them in.

"If I know anything about horse business," Vaughan said, "that was more than purchase money that was passing over the table under Luke Bridger's auspices. Never heard of so many bronc buyers on one ranch before. Bridger must think we're plumb simple."

At Calgary they checked in at Ma

Casey's boarding house. The room was plain but comfortable. Pink stretched himself out for a nap, while Vaughan sat near the window to watch the doings in the street.

About an hour and a half later, Pink awakened, to rub his eyes and focus them on Vaughan who was staring down into the street with new intentness. Pink slid to the window, shoving his curly head next to his friend's. He saw a handsome rider, whose horse was proudly stepping along Main Street.

"Fine lookin' fella, ain't he?" Pink observed sarcastically.

"Yeah," Vaughan replied. "Gets around fast. Same fella I saw at the Horseshoe Bar, couple of times, stompin' broncs."

They looked at each other thoughtfully. Somehow that rider lingered in their minds as a question mark.

LATER in the afternoon they went for a ride, and dusk was just falling when they returned to Main Street. After tying their horses to a hitchrack, they glanced at a shop window displaying blue jeans, hardware, lariats, waterbags and guns, and then walked into the Star Pub for a bite. The steak was good, and so was the beer they had to wash it down.

Pink, facing the door, suddenly nudged Vaughan. Rowdy looked up to see two men entering the saloon. One was Samson Wilkes, of the Horseshoe Bar. The other was the mysterious stranger.

"Our friend doesn't keep such good company," Pink muttered.

Wilkes turned and saw them. To their surprise he came over to the table, the stranger following him. Without waiting to be introduced, the stranger, looking handsome and rather likable, addressed Vaughan.

"Drinks are on me, boys," he announced.

"Why, thanks," Rowdy said. "Next round is on us."

"Usin' up your last earnings pretty fast, ain't you?" asked Wilkes, with heavy humor. "Rowdy always was generous," he added for the stranger's benefit.

Vaughan kept a still face. "Sit down," he invited. "I don't believe you've introduced your friend, Wilkes."

"My friend is a top rider," Wilkes said with pride. "He's in town a little ahead of the outfit. Rowdy Vaughan and Pink Perkins, let me make you acquainted with—"

"Jim Blodgett," volunteered the stranger, interrupting Wilkes, whose jaw fell open with astonishment. "Chief horse purchasing agent and bronc stomper for the Horseshoe Bar."

"Vaughan can give you lessons," Wilkes remarked. "He's been tamin' them at Horseshoe Bar for months."

"Oh," said Blodgett. "Maybe he's my man."

"Maybe you fellows are mixed up," Pink said. "I understand the best rider on the Horseshoe Bar is a fellow named Conroy. Know anything about him?"

"Conroy?" said Blodgett, winking at Wilkes. "Sure do! Conroy's tougher than rawhide. I'm looking forward to a little saddle busting with him when he comes to town."

"Maybe I could get in on it," suggested Vaughan.

"I'll arrange it," Blodgett offered. "And now, how about a little cards to finish off the night?"

"You boys start," Pink said. "I've got an errand. I'll get in the game when I come back."

Pink hopped around the corner to the telegraph office and sent two wires—one to Bitter Creek Ranch in Wyoming and one to the Cross L in Montana—both asking for jobs. By the time he got back, the game was well under way. Vaughan was dealing and Sam Wilkes was talking, in high spirits.

"I'm going to take back that mazuma you carried off from the Horseshoe Bar today," he said. "The money will be good to spend."

"It'll be better in Rowdy's pockets," said Pink.

"Ten," said Blodgett, moving some chips.

"Twenty," Vaughan offered.

Vaughan pointed to the greenbacks. "You don't make that kind of money just breeding horses!" (Chap. I)

BUT this was not Vaughan's night. When they laid down their cards Blodgett had a pair of sevens and a pair of kings; Vaughan an ace of spades, an ace of hearts and three tens; Wilkes had four queens.

"That cleans me out," said Blodgett. "I'm finished. I don't bet if I can't pay off."

"I'm with you there," said Vaughan. Coming out second best, he had won fifty dollars, adding to the sixty in his money-belt. "Tell you what," he offered Blodgett. "I'll lend you fifty if you want to stay in. I'll take the risk of your paying me back in a couple of days."

"You're a white man," Blodgett said with appreciation. "Hate to see Wilkes get away with all that money."

As the game warmed up, they agreed to double the stakes. Blodgett dealt. Ten, twenty, twenty-five, forty, went the bidding as chips clicked on the table top.

"Fifty," Blodgett offered, splurging his entire balance.

Pink, who hadn't gotten in the game yet, hung over the table, his mouth open. When they laid down their hands, everyone strained to see the cards for which Blodgett showed so much confidence.

He had three kings and two threes. No one looked at Vaughan's hand. For in front of Sam Wilkes lay a royal flush in diamonds!

"Sorry, Vaughan," Blodgett apologized. "I'll have to make it up after I see Conroy. He'll lend me fifty. Didn't believe Sam Wilkes was so smart with cards."

He said good night and started out. A new customer, entering, spoke to him as they passed. It was Tim Casey, son of the boarding-house keeper.

"You two look pretty glum," Casey said to the two cowboys. "If that's what drinking does, you ought to give it up."

"It ain't the drink," Vaughan said. "It's the cards." He had reason to be glum. Out of his original sixty dollars, he now had just ten. Lucky for both of them Pink had stayed out of the game.

"The cards," Pink corroborated, "and your friend Blodgett."

"Who?"

"Blodgett—the fellow you spoke to on the way in."

"Blodgett?" repeated Casey, mystified. "That was Harry Conroy!"

Conroy! Pink and Rowdy stared at each other in dawning comprehension. Then a smile broke over Vaughan's face.

"Well, he did me one favor," he said, finishing his drink. "He showed me he's a mighty slick article. So I'm going to get that money back from him before tomorrow night. Come on, Pink. Let's go."

Together they emerged from the Star Pub and headed across the sidewalk toward the rack where their horses were still hitched, waiting patiently for them. In the darkness, up the wide street came a pistol shot and then the wild yelping of skylarking cowboys. Paying but little attention to the noise, Vaughan and Pink tightened the cinches of their broncs, climbed aboard and headed down the thoroughfare toward the livery stable.

From that direction came more whoops, and then suddenly, out of the shadows appeared a group of riders, coming like the wind. The six-gun flamed again, aimed at the stars. At the heavy roar of the forty-five, Dixie, Vaughan's bronc—mettlesome and nervous always—began to buck and sunfish madly, rearing at every jump.

The oncoming riders saw this and raced toward him, whooping loudly. As they passed through the light of a saloon, Vaughan recognized two of them—Harry Conroy and Samson Wilkes. Vaughan pulled tight on the reins trying to control Dixie who was pitching harder than ever.

Wilkes uttered a jeering laugh and pointed. "Top rider!" he yelled. "Don't let him throw you, peeler."

CONROY'S teeth made a white streak upon his brown face as he swerved his horse. In that brief instant Vaughan sensed that there was something vicious about that reckless smile. Vaughan uttered a warning yell. Pink cursed and reached for his gun. The next instant there was a jarring thud of collision and

Vaughan and Dixie, horse and rider, were rolling in the dust. The shouting riders rode on up the street and disappeared into the night.

In going down, Dixie had bumped against Pink's bronc, jarring the six-gun from the little cowboy's hand. But he was out of his saddle in a flash and hunting for his lost weapon. By the time he found it and had sent three booming shots after the riders, chances of hitting anything was hopeless. Realizing this, he shoved the Colt into its holster and ran to his friend's aid.

Dixie was up again, trembling, with all desire to buck knocked out of him. But Vaughan was not so lucky. When he tried to rise, he emitted a cry of pain and then sank back in the dust.

"Pink!" he said sharply. "Something's wrong. I think my ankle's busted."

"No," said the little cowboy, in quick alarm. He bent down, made a hasty appraisal and then straightened up again. He stared down the street. "There's a doctor a few doors away from Ma Casey's. I noticed his sign today when we rode into town. I'll load you on my horse, take you back to our room, then get him to come and take a look at you."

A few minutes later, with Vaughan once more in saddle and biting his lips to control his pain, they started down the street, Pink leading both horses by the reins. Soon they halted in front of Ma Casey's home. After much difficulty Pink managed to help his friend into the house and onto the bed. Then he went after the doctor.

When he returned with the Vandyke bearded doctor, they found Vaughan propped up against a couple of pillows, white faced but cheerful.

"Just set this shank, doc," he called out, "pour some liniment on it, and I'll be all right."

The medical man cut off the riding boot and made an examination. His ministrations at times were painful and Vaughan had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out. The doctor bathed Vaughan's foot and ankle several times in hot and cold water and put on tight bandages. Then he rose to his feet.

"The ankle is in bad condition and some of the bones of the foot may be broken," he said. "When I come back tomorrow morning, I'll probably be able to tell you definitely." He picked up his bag and departed.

When they were alone, Pink eyed his friend with scorn. "Well, you are clumsy," he said. "Why didn't you have sense enough to fall on your head. Then you wouldn't have been hurt a-tall!"

CHAPTER II

Horse for a Loan

DUSK was just falling, the following afternoon, when Vaughan heard the sound of boots come clattering down the hall. Pink's excited voice came to him.

"Good news, Rowdy!" Pink was yelling. "Telegram!"

The place was Ma Casey's boarding house where Pink had paused before the door of her "best" room. Ma Casey had just emerged from a session with the doctor. She placed a motherly arm on Pink's shoulder.

"The doctor says his ankle isn't broken, after all," she said. "It's just a bad sprain. But he'll be laid up for a week —possibly even longer."

Pink's face registered dismay. He stared at her. "A week!" he echoed. "Did you say a *week*, Mrs. Casey?"

The good woman chuckled. "Why, yes," she answered. "You remember this morning the doctor thought one of the bones was fractured; that would have meant at least a couple of months in bed. You're getting off lucky, both of you!"

"Guess you're right," Pink agreed. He thanked her and passed on into the room. The doctor was putting his instruments away. He nodded his farewell to Pink and left to converse further with Ma Casey.

Vaughan lay on the big four-poster bed, surrounded by more comforts than any cowboy has a right to expect in this world. His injured ankle was propped up, in a plaster cast and big with bandages. He opened his eyes and grinned at Pink.

"How do you mean good luck?" he asked. "What telegram?"

Pink advanced to the bed. "This," he said. He reached into his shirt pocket and unfolded a telegram. "This is from Wooden Shoes Mielke, Cross L Ranch, Montana. It say here: 'Come a-running!' Which means we got jobs, seein' as how that's what I asked for when I telegraphed him yesterday. I told him we needed 'em in a hurry."

Vaughan was cheered by the news. "Then we can shake the dust from this place, soon as I'm up again and have settled my little claim on Conroy."

Pink folded the telegram and replaced it in his pocket. "Oh, by the way—how are you feelin'?"

Vaughan laughed out loud. "You little coyote, I was wonderin' when you'd get around to askin' me that."

Pink shrugged. "I thought I'd get the important stuff over first." He scowled at his best friend. "Regardin' your claim on Conroy, I just heard down the street that he's plannin' to pull out of town tomorrow, so that's one little chore I aim to settle for you." He raised his hand to fend off any objections. "Now no 'buts' about it. When it comes to talkin', Harry Conroy's my kind of critter, and I don't softsoap as easy as you." He pointed at the injured ankle. "If he gets away, you'll never see him again—or your fifty dollars."

Vaughan's face clouded with gloom as he also surveyed the plaster cast. "That's true," he agreed reluctantly. "No tellin' if I'll ever run into Conroy again." His voice grew stern. "But don't mention him bumpin' me, last night. That's between Conroy and me, strictly personal, if we ever do meet again. Remember that, you wart!"

After some persuasion, Pink agreed to omit mentioning that incident in his conversation with Conroy. This was because, in his mind he believed that the collision had been largely accidental and caused by too much liquor; he had not seen Conroy's smile. He started for the door, then paused there for a final word. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, fallin' off a horse that a-way!" he gibed. "When you get better, if you want me to, Rowdy, I'll give you some ridin' lessons."

Vaughan uttered a whoop and threw the first thing which happened to be handy—a paper-backed magazine—at him. Pink dodged it neatly—and was gone!

Walking up Main Street in the early dusk, Pink was imbued with a new surge of confidence, inspired partly by the telegram in his shirt pocket and partly by the innate justice of his cause. For psychological reasons, he had taken the trouble of strapping a forty-four to his hip. Not that he intended to use it. The mere fact of his wearing it, he reasoned, would add strength to his bargaining power.

He stopped in front of the Star Pub. The merry-makers were making a full night of it. Well, the more witnesses the better. He hitched up his gun-belt and pushed through the swinging doors.

By the yellow light of a score of lamps, Pink saw that the long barroom was crowded with men and women whooping it up Eliza Jane. Their enjoyment was reflected in various attitudes of alcoholic relaxation. Even the gambling tables were cleared for whisky, the professional gamblers taking a night off to dance and frolic with the rest. Pink noticed that the Horseshoe Bar outfit was amply represented. One whole corner of the room, in fact, was taken up by what looked like a Horseshoe Bar convention.

PINK counted Ben Tucker, Samson Wilkes, Hoss Wallaby, Luke Bridger and a dozen others. And holding court over all sat Harry Conroy, a dancing girl on his knee, one hand holding a full shot-glass for a sceptre. Pink's own entrance went unnoticed. He stepped to the bar, ordered a drink, and carried it to the

far corner of the room. He raised it just as Harry Conroy raised his. Their eyes met over the rims of the glasses.

"Here's to what I'm thinkin'," he said.

"That goes double for me," Conroy grinned. "You come over to change sides?"

Pink shook his head. "I come over to pick up a piece of change."

Conroy indicated his little group of celebrants with a cheery wave of his arm. "Easy come, easy go," he offered.

"You sure must be able to make money easy," Pink countered. "All I'm lookin' for is fifty."

Conroy pulled out his pockets with alcoholic good humor. "Haven't got it," he said.

Pink selected a chair and straddled it, folding his arms across the back and leaning his chin on his arms. "Then you know where to get it."

Conroy laughed. "Little man, I like you. You put your questions straight. You don't come beggin'—you ask for what's comin' to you like a man. Money comes easy on the Horseshoe Bar!" He swung his head, "Eh, Wilkes?"

Pink followed his eye. Samson Wilkes looked up with a dark scowl, sudden alarm registering on his face. Luke Bridger leaned forward and put a cautioning hand on Conroy's arm. Conroy shook it off. When he looked at Pink, Pink noticed that his eyes were slightly glazed.

Conroy went on. "Little man, I want you to know that I don't go for sly stuff when it comes to handlin' wild critters. I know too much about 'em. And they know I know. I don't say your friend Vaughan don't deserve to get paid back. But I don't like him."

Pink reached for the bottle on the table and refilled his glass. "Fifty dollars," he repeated.

"Ain't got it."

"Get it."

Conroy raised his glass to his lips. "To-morrow," he said.

Pink downed his own drink. "To-night!" he said. "I'm pullin' out at day-

The Silent One rapped the badge-toter on the head (Chap. VII)

break, and the fifty goes with me."

Conroy waved his hand impatiently and reached for another drink. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow."

"Tonight!" Pink said. He drew his chair closer to Conroy, his eyes leveling. "If I don't leave at daybreak tomorrow, my stay may prove a mite embarrassin' to some of your friends. I'm beginnin' to put two-and-two together, Conroy. Luke Bridger can tell you why me and Vaughan left the Horseshoe Bar. From what I've seen there, I'm beginnin' to think the sheriff might be interested, too."

He was bluffing and he knew it. If the play was clean, Conroy could laugh in his face. If it was dirty, Pink still had no evidence to back his suspicions. But he counted on the Horseshoe Bar's desire to avoid snooping.

His eyes held steadily to Conroy's. Conroy turned slowly and fixed Luke Bridger with a sober gaze for a matter of seconds.

"Give him the fifty, Luke," Conroy said thickly.

Luke Bridger swallowed nervously. "I haven't got it, Harry."

"I said give him the fifty!"

Bridger's eyes were little ferrets dancing over the assembled herd. "We just telegraphed the last dollar to Ma—"

CONROY moved swiftly, the back of his hand thudding against Luke Bridger's open mouth. "I'm drunk," he whispered hoarsely, "but you're drunker!" Slowly, he raised himself to an unsteady standing posture. "Little man," he said, "come with me."

Pink rose uncertainly. He looked around the group. There was no offer of open hostility. All hands were in full view. He turned and followed Conroy out through the swinging doors.

Outside, Conroy led the way silently along the main street. At the livery stable he waited for Pink to catch up with him.

"You're gettin' a break, little man," Conroy said. "You're gettin' more than your fifty dollars' worth." He opened the door of the stable and the two entered. They moved back in the direction of the box stalls, carrying the lantern supplied by a sleepy hostler.

Conroy turned to Pink. "You're pullin' out at daybreak?"

It was more of a question than a statement. Pink nodded.

"Sayin' good-by to anyone in particular?" Conroy asked.

Pink decided to play along. He shook his head.

Conroy pointed with an unsteady arm. "There's your fifty bucks, with interest. An Oregon horse. His name's Chub." He indicated a paint pony leaning sleepily against a stall gate.

Pink stepped forward for a closer examination. At length he nodded. "That's eighty dollars' worth of horse," he said. "Is he yours to give away?"

Conroy's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "If he isn't I'm payin' the wrong feed bill. Take him or leave him for the debt."

"I'll take him," Pink said.

Conroy called to the hostler who let Chub out of the stall, handing the halter to Pink. "Now get out of my sight," Conroy said. "You're spoiling my day."

"The pleasure is mutual," Pink said.

He made his way back to Ma Casey's place without meeting a soul. After bedding Chub in the stable, he climbed the stairs to Vaughan's room and tapped lightly, then opened the door.

Vaughan was propped up in bed with a book. "Been worryin' about you," he said. "How'd it come off?"

"Better than I expected," Pink replied, removing his hat and settling himself on the edge of the bed. "Got the fifty in trade, with interest." He smiled at Vaughan's puzzled look. "Seems like Conroy has got himself mixed up in some deal with the Horseshoe Bar. They pooled their money and sent it off somewhere—why I don't know. Has something to do with horses. And that's what I got paid off in—horse!"

"No!" Vaughan exclaimed.

"Yep," Pink went on, rolling a cigarette. "He's in Casey's stable, and he's worth every cent of eighty dollars and more. You'll be needin' him now, with your bum ankle. Did the sawbones say

when you could travel?"

"Not for a week, at least."

"All right. I'm headin' out at daybreak to cinch our welcome and jobs at Cross L. You come along when you can. I'll tell Ma to keep Chub—that's his name—till you're ready to move." He rose to his feet. "I'll say my good-bys now."

The two men shook hands, and Pink left the room. Vaughan sat up for some time, tracing on a map of the provinces the trail that Pink would take on his journey into Montana. A few days later he was to take that trail himself, leaving his experiences with the shadier side of civilization behind him—he hoped for good.

CHAPTER III

Lost in a Blizzard

ROWDY VAUGHAN was unhappy, not simply because Chub went so slow, but because a perverse fate had chosen to land him in the middle of nowhere in a blinding snowstorm. To complicate his entanglement in the twine of a turbulent career, more than snow would ordinarily be necessary. And now it *was* more than snow.

Rowdy Vaughan was lost.

He stood up in the stirrups and shook off the thick layer of snow which clung, damp and close-packed, to his coat. The yellow folds were full of it; his gray hat, pulled low over his purple ears, was heaped with it. He reached up a gloved hand and scraped away as much as he could, wrapped the long-skirted, "sourdough" coat around his numbed legs, then settled into the saddle with a shiver of distaste at the plight he was in, and wished himself back at the Horseshoe Bar on the Canadian side of Milk River.

Dixie, standing knee-deep in a drift, turned his head to look back, blinking at the snow which beat insistently in his eyes.

"It's up to you, old boy," Vaughan told him resignedly. "I'm plumb lost; I never was in this country before. If you've any idea where we're at, I'm dead willing to have you pilot the layout. Never mind Chub; locating his feed when it's stuck under his nose is his limit."

Chub lifted an ear dispiritedly when his name was spoken. His part was to carry Vaughan's bed, and to follow unquestionably where Vaughan and Dixie might lead. He was cold and tired and hungry, but his faith in his master was strong; the responsibility of finding shelter before dark came down rested not with him.

Vaughan pressed his chilled knees against Dixie's ribs, but the hand upon the reins was carefully noncommittal; so that Dixie, having no suggestion of his master's wish, ventured to indulge his own. He turned tail squarely to the storm and went straight ahead. Vaughan put his hands deep into his pockets, snuggled farther down into the sheepskin collar of his coat, and rode passive, enduring.

They brought up against a wire fence, and Vaughan, rousing from his apathy, tried to peer through the white, shifting wall of the storm.

"You're a swell guide—not," he remarked to the horse. "Now you, you hike down this fence till you locate a gate or a corner, or any darned thing!"

Dixie, sneezing the snow from his nostrils, turned obediently. Chub, his hoofs dragging wearily in the snow, trailed patiently behind. Half an hour of this, and it seemed as if it would go on forever.

Through the swirl Vaughan could see the posts standing forlornly in the snow, with sixteen feet of blizzard between; at no time could he distinguish more than two or three at once, and there were long minutes when the snow wall stood, blank and shifting, just beyond the first post.

Then Dixie lifted his head and gazed questioningly before him, his ears point-

ed forward—sentient, strained—and whinnied shrill challenge. He hurried his steps, dragging Chub out of the beginnings of a dream. Vaughan straightened and took his hands from his pockets.

Out beyond the dim, wavering outline of the farthest post came answer to the challenge. A mysterious, vague shape grew impalpably upon the strained vision; a horse sneezed, then nickered eagerly. Vaughan drew up and waited.

"Hello!" he called cheerfully. "Pleasant day, this. Out for your health?"

The shape hesitated, as though taken aback by the greeting. Vaughan, puzzled, rode closer.

"Who—who is it?" The voice sounded perturbed; and it was, moreover, the voice of a woman.

VAUGHAN pulled up short and swore into his collar. Women are not, as a rule, to be met out on the blank prairie in a Montana blizzard.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I thought it was a man. I'm looking for the Cross L home ranch. You don't happen to know where it is, do you?"

"No, I don't," she declared dismally. "I don't know where any place is. I'm teaching school in this neighborhood. I was going to spend Sunday with a friend, but this storm came up, and I'm —lost."

"Same here," said Vaughan pleasantly. "We'll have to pool our chances, I guess. Any gate down that way? Or haven't you followed the fence?"

"I followed it for miles and miles—it seemed. It must be some big field of the Cross L."

"And you couldn't give a rough guess at how far it is to the Cross L?"

He could vaguely see her shake her head. "Ordinarily it should be about six miles beyond Rodway's, where I board. But I haven't the haziest idea of where Rodway's place is. I'm all at sea in this snow." Her voice was rueful.

"Well, if you came up along the fence, there's no use going back that way; and there's sure nothing made by going away from it—that's the way I came. Why don't we go on the way you're headed?"

"We might as well, I suppose," she assented; and Vaughan turned and rode by her side, grateful for the plurality of the pronoun which tacitly included him in her wanderings, and meditating many things. For one, he wondered if she were as nice a girl as her voice sounded. He could not see much of her face, because it was muffled in a white silk scarf. Only her eyes showed, and they were dark and bright.

He awoke to the fact that the wind, grown colder, beat upon her cruelly. After long plodding, the line of posts turned unexpectedly a right angle, and Vaughan drew a relieved breath.

"We'll have the wind on our backs now," he remarked.

His tone was elaborately cheerful. He was wondering if the girl was dressed warmly.

"If you're cold," he began, "I'll open my bedroll and get out a blanket." He stopped Dixie. "I ought to have thought of it before," he said, and swung down stiffly into the snow.

Her eyes followed his movement with a very evident interest while he unbuckled the pack Chub had carried since sunrise and drew out a blanket.

"Stand in your stirrups," he said briskly, "and I'll wrap you up. It's a Navajo, and the wind will have a time trying to find a thin spot."

"You're thoughtful." She snuggled into it thankfully. "I was cold."

Vaughan tucked it around her with care. He was pretty uncomfortable himself, and for that reason he was the more anxious that the girl should be warm. It came to him that she was a cute little schoolma'am; he was glad she belonged close around the Cross L. He also wished he knew her name—and so he set about finding it out, with much guile.

Sheltered in the thick folds of the Navajo, she laughed, and the sound of it sent the blood galloping through Rowdy Vaughan's body so that he was almost warm. He went and scraped the snow out of his saddle, and swung up,

feeling that, after all, there were worse things in the world than being lost in a blizzard, with a sweet-voiced, bright-eyed schoolma'am who could laugh so.

"I don't want to have you think I may be a bold, bad robber," he said, when they got going again. "My name's Rowdy Vaughan—for which I beg your pardon. Mother named me Rowland, never knowing I'd get out here from Ohio and have her nice, pretty name mutilated that way. I'm from the Horseshoe Bar, over the line, and if I have my way, I'll be a Cross L man before another day." Then he waited expectantly.

"For fear you may think I'm a—a robber-woman," she answered him solemnly—he felt sure her eyes twinkled, if only he could have seen them—"I'm Jessie Conroy. And if you're from over the line, maybe you know my brother Harry. He was over there a year or two."

Vaughan's shoulders stiffened—presumably against the wind. Harry Conroy's sister! He swore inwardly. "I may have met him," he parried in a tone you'd never notice as being painstakingly careless. "I guess I did, come to think of it."

Jessie Conroy turned her face toward him and smiled her pleasure, and Vaughan hovered between heaven and —another place. He was glad she smiled, and he was afraid of what the subject might bring in the way of pitfalls. As to her brother, he put an iron clamp on his tongue.

"This looks to me like a lane," he said diplomatically. "We must be getting somewhere. Don't you recognize any landmarks?"

Jessie Conroy leaned forward and peered through the clouds of snow dust. Already the night was creeping down upon the land, stealthily turning the blank white of the blizzard into a blank gray—which was as near darkness as it could get, because of the snow which fell and fell, and yet seemed never to find an abiding-place, but danced and swirled giddily in the wind as the cold froze it dry. There would be no more damp, clinging masses that night. It was sifting down like flour from a giant sieve; and of the supply there seemed no end.

"I don't know of any lanes around here," she began dubiously, "unless it's—"

Vaughan looked sharply at her muffled figure and wondered why she broke off so suddenly. She was staring hard at the few, faint traces of landmarks.

Out ahead, a dog began barking vaguely, and Vaughan turned eagerly to the sound. Dixie, scenting human habitation, stepped out more briskly through the snow, and even Chub lifted an ear briefly to show he heard.

"It may not be any one you know," Vaughan remarked, and his voice showed his longing; "but it'll be shelter and a warm fire—and supper. Can you appreciate such blessings, Miss Con-

[*Turn page*]

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roy? I can. I've been in the saddle since sunrise; and I was so sure I'd strike the Cross L by dinner-time that I didn't bring a bite to eat. It was a sheep-camp where I stopped, and the grub didn't look good to me, anyway—I've called myself bad names all the afternoon for being more dainty than sensible. But it's all right now, I guess."

THE storm lifted suddenly, as storms have a way of doing, and a low, squat ranchhouse stood dimly revealed against the bleak expanse of wind-tortured prairie. Vaughan gave an exultant little whoop and made for the gate, leaned and swung it open and rode through, dragging Chub after him by main strength, as usual. When he turned to close the gate after Miss Conroy he found her still sitting her horse in the lane.

"Come on in," he called, with a trace of impatience born of his weariness and hunger.

"Thank you, no," Jessie Conroy's voice was as crisply cold as the wind which fluttered the Navajo blanket around her face. "I much prefer the blizzard."

For a moment Vaughan found nothing to say; he just stared.

"This is old Bill Brown's place," Jessie Conroy explained reluctantly. "I'd rather freeze than go in!"

The dog was growling hysterically over their presence, and Bill Brown himself came out to learn what it was all about. He could see two dim figures at the gate.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Why don't you come in? Is what you are talking about so important that you prefer freezing to death?"

Vaughan hesitated, his questioning gaze upon Miss Conroy.

"Go in," she commanded imperiously, quite as if he were a refractory pupil. "You're tired out, and hungry. I'm neither. Besides, I know where I am now. I can find my way without any trouble. Go in, I tell you!"

But Vaughan stayed where he was, with the gate creaking to and fro between them. Dixie circled till his back was to the wind. "I hope you don't think you're going to mill around out here alone," Vaughan said tartly.

"I can manage very well. I'm not lost any more, I tell you. Rodway's is only three miles from here, and I know the direction."

The heavy form of Bill Brown came closer as he waded out through the piled-up drifts to greet them, wondering what weighty discussion kept them dawdling there in the cold. As he passed Vaughan by with the cursory glance of a disinterested stranger and went on to where Miss Conroy waited stubbornly in the lane, Vaughan noted Bill Brown's dignified bearing and walk, and wondered why this contrary girl shied off entering his shelter.

"Oh, it's you!" Brown said, a grim note in his voice. "Well, come in and thaw out! I hope you didn't think you wouldn't be welcome—you knew better. You got lost, I reckon."

Jessie Conroy struck Badger sharply across one flank and disappeared into the night. "When I ask shelter of *you*," she flung back, "you'll know it."

Vaughan started after her, but met Bill Brown squarely in the gate. Brown eyed him sharply.

"Say, young man, how did you come by that packhorse?" the rancher demanded, as Chub brushed past him.

"Is there any reason why I should answer a stranger's questions about my horses?" snapped Vaughan, adopting Miss Conroy's attitude toward Bill Brown. "I might as well ask you how you came by the enmity of Miss Conroy."

But as he said the word "Conroy," the image, not of Jessie, but of her brother, Harry Conroy, popped tormentingly into his mind. Chub, a handicap at any time, was tired, and offered nothing approaching speed. He clung to his shuffling trot, which was really no better than a walk.

"You may be blinded by the snow storm now—and by other things," came the dry voice of Bill Brown through the blizzard. "But, stranger, if you are go-

ing to be around these parts, as I reckon you are, better come back and talk horses with me some day."

CHAPTER IV

Another Cause for Dislike

AFTER five minutes spent alternately in spurring Dixie and yanking at Chub's lead-rope, Vaughan grew frightened for the girl and took to shouting. While they were in the fenced lane, Jessie Conroy must perforce ride straight ahead, but the lane would not last always. As though with malicious intent, the snow swooped down again and the world became an unreal, nightmare void wherein was nothing save shifting, blinding snow and wind and bitter, numbing cold.

Vaughan stood in his stirrups, cupped his chilled fingers around his numbed lips, and sent a long-drawn "Who-ee!" shrilling weirdly into the night.

"Hello!" came the voice of Jessie Conroy, tantalizingly calm, and as superior as the greeting of Central in a new brick telephone building. "Were you looking for me, Mr. Vaughan?"

She was close to him—so close that she had not needed to raise her voice perceptibly. Vaughan rode up alongside, remembering uncomfortably his prolonged shouting.

"I sure was," he admitted. And then: "You rode off with my blanket on." He was very proud of his matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh!" Jessie Conroy was almost deceived, and a bit disappointed. "I'll give it to you now, and you can go back, if you know the way."

"No hurry," said Vaughan politely. "I'll go on and see if you can find a place that looks good to you. You seem pretty particular."

Jessie Conroy may have blushed in the shelter of the blanket,

"I suppose it did look strange to you," she confessed, a strong tone of defiance in her voice and manner. "Bill Brown is an enemy to Harry. Because he lost a horse or two out of a field, one time, he actually accused Harry of taking them! Nobody believed him, of course. It was a contemptible lie! But he did his best to hurt Harry's name, and I would rather freeze than ask shelter of him."

Vaughan was strangely silent as they plodded on. Finally the girl looked at him sharply, her bright, dark eyes shining through the whiteness all around them.

"My packhorse, Chub, seems to have an idea about where he wants to go," Vaughan said. "I guess we might as well follow him. He ain't often taken with a rush of brains to the head. And we can't be any worse lost than we are now, can we?"

Jessie Conroy said no dispiritedly, and they swung about and followed Chubs' leadership apathetically. It took Chub just five minutes to demonstrate that he knew what he was about. When he stopped, it was with his nose against a corral gate. Not content with that, he whinnied, and a new, exultant note was in the sound. A deep-voiced dog bayed loudly, and a shrill yelp cut in and clamored for recognition.

Jessie Conroy gasped. "It's Lion and Skeesicks. We're at Rodway's, Mr. Vaughan."

Vaughan, for the second time, thanked their luck. Then a cloud came over his thoughts as he caught a glimpse of Jessie Conroy's expression as she seemed to study Chub, asking perhaps, "Why did *he* lead the way here?"

When he was stripping the pack off Chub's back, ten minutes later, Vaughan thought many things he would not have cared to say aloud. It might be all right, but it sure was strange, he told himself, that Chub belonged here at Rodway's, when he remembered that Pink had told him that Harry Conroy had claimed that he was an Oregon horse. Vaughan had thought his dislike of Harry Conroy serious enough, but it looked now as though another item must be added to the list.

He went in, and ate his supper reflectively. Many of the cowhands, interested, as always, in a stranger, asked questions about the trip and how long he had been lost in the blizzard. Then, when they heard that he was from across the Canadian line, they were all ears for news of that country. At the end of the meal, when Vaughan felt much better and warmer than he had been for some time, the proprietor of the ranch greeted him and expressed a desire for a few words with him.

FAR from being heavy-set and stocky, like Bill Brown, Rodway was tall. He was considerably younger than Bill Brown, and a shock of dark hair fell carelessly down over his forehead. Vaughan liked his friendly appearance and easy-going manner, but judged that once this man's good nature had been imposed upon the offender had better watch out!

"I'm very grateful to you," said Vaughan, "for taking me in like this."

"Don't mention it!" replied Rodway modestly. "We're all fond of Miss Conroy here, and I guess you did plenty for her out there in that snowstorm, from what I hear. On that account, if for no other reason, I'm more than pleased to have you with us."

"Everybody has been very good to me," said Vaughan, "and I appreciate it."

"The boys will fix you up with a bunk, I guess," Rodway went on. " 'Tain't no night for a stranger to be out roamin'."

"Thanks again."

"And in the mornin' I'll show you around a bit," Rodway finished, moving off, "in case you'd like to see some real horses."

Vaughan fancied that, with the last remark, Rodway had watched his expression especially closely. If he had been tempted to discard that fancy as idle imagination, the bunkhouse conversation would have caused him to reconsider. When he was taken to his sleeping quarters, which were at the same time the sleeping quarters of close to a score of the men of Rodway's outfit, he began to hear strange murmurs.

"What did Rodway say to you?" one of the men finally asked.

"He greeted me to the ranch," replied Vaughan. "That was all."

In the bunkhouse, general bedlam broke loose in a way in which it is particularly capable of doing when a group of men get together after a hard day's work. There were songs, wistful and bawdy, sung in the simple and sincere manner of the western cowpuncher. There were idle pranks a-plenty, too, —through all of which Vaughan naturally found himself getting better acquainted with the men.

As the familiarity grew, one of them shouted:

"Shall we initiate him, boys?"

"We won't have to," answered another. "Rodway will do it himself in the mornin'."

"Yep," said another, "he sure will. And he's sure burned up since that last dozen horses turned up missin'. He suspects everybody."

"Can you blame him?" still another continued. "From one ranch after another the horses just clean vanish, time and again, as though they were never there. If I was Rodway, I'd be suspicious, too."

The speaker took a quick look at Rowdy Vaughan as he spoke, and Vaughan saw the way the cards were stacking up. When finally the commotion died down and he got into bed, he did not fall asleep within two minutes, as he might have been expected to do after the ordeal and exhaustion of pushing his way, hungry, through a white-gray wilderness.

Yet, strangely enough, his last conscious thought before he did sink off to sleep was not of stolen horses, or grudges against Conroy, or blame that might be heaped against him—against Vaughan himself—because of his possession of Chub.

It was:

"And she's Harry Conroy's sister! Now, what do you think of that? But all the same, she's sure a nice little schoolma'am."

CHAPTER V

Rowdy Vaughan's New Boss

NEXT morning, after breakfast, Rodway followed Vaughan out to the stable, and repeated Bill Brown's question.

"I'd like to know where you got this horse," he began, with an apologetic sort of determination in his tone as he indicated the disinterested Chub.

"Why?" Vaughan asked sharply.

"He happens to belong to me," Rodway explained. "He was run off with a bunch three years ago, and this is the first trace anybody has ever got of 'em. I see the brand's been reworked. It was a Roman four—that's my brand—but now it looks like a map of Texas. But I'd swear to the horse—raised him from a colt."

Vaughan had expected something of the sort, and he knew quite well what he was going to do; he had settled that the night before, with the memory of Jessie Conroy's eyes fresh in his mind.

"I got him in a deal across the line," he said easily. "I was told he came from east Oregon. But last night when he piloted us straight to your corral gate I guessed he'd been here before. He's yours, all right, if you say so."

"Of course, he isn't worth such a pile of money," Rodway apologized, "but the kids thought a heap of him. Howsomever, I'd rather locate some of the horses that were with him—or the man you got him of. There were some mighty good horses run out of this country then, but they were all out on the range, so we didn't miss 'em in time to do any good. Do you know who took 'em across the line?"

"No," said Vaughan deliberately. "The man I got Chub from went on north and I heard he got killed. I don't know of any other in the deal."

Rodway grunted, and Vaughan began vigorously brushing Dixie's roughened coat. "If you don't mind" he said after a minute, "I'd like to borrow Chub to pack my bed over to the Cross L. I can bring him back again."

"Why, sure!" assented Rodway eagerly. "I hate to take him from you, but the kids—"

"Oh, that's all right," Vaughan interrupted cheerfully. "It's all in the game, and I should have looked up his pedigree. Anyway, it was worth the price of him to have him along last night. We'd have milled around till daylight, or frozen to death, only for him."

"That's what," agreed Rodway. "Jessie's horse is one she brought from home lately, and he ain't located yet; I dunno as he'd have piloted her home. Billy—that's what the kids named him—was born and raised here, you see. I'll bet he's glad to get back—and the kids will be plumb wild. For me, I don't care—except that all of us ranch owners around here would like to get to the bottom of this horse-thievin' ring."

"There's a lot of it goin' on, I hear," Vaughan observed.

"There sure is," replied Rodway. "We used to think it was sort of casual like. It happened just occasionally. Now it goes on like a big business, and plenty of Montana ranchers are ready to throw a string over a cottonwood limb to hang the thieves, one after another, to end the situation—the way they used to do before the West got 'civilized'—particularly since the law forces are likely to be crooked, too."

Vaughan did not answer; there seemed nothing in particular to say, and he was wondering if he would see Jessie Conroy before he left. She had not eaten breakfast with the others; from their manner, he judged that no one expected her to. He was not well informed upon the subject of schoolma'ams.

He saddled leisurely, and packed his bed for the last time upon Chub. The red-and-yellow Navajo blanket he folded tenderly, with an unconscious smile for the service it had done, and laid it in its accustomed place in the bed. Then, having no plausible excuse for going back to the house, he mounted and rode

away into the brilliant white world, wistfully watching the house from the tail of his eye.

SHE might have got up in time to see him off, he thought discontentedly; but he supposed one cow-puncher more or less made little difference to her. Anyway, he didn't know as he had any license to moon around her. She probably had a fellow; she might even be engaged, for all he knew. And—she was Harry Conroy's sister; and from his experience with the breed, good looks didn't count for anything. Harry was good-looking, and he was a snake, if ever there was one. He had never expected to lie for him—but he had done it, all right—and because Harry's sister happened to have nice eyes and a pretty little foot!

He had half a mind to go back and tell Rodway all he knew about those horses; it was only a matter of time, anyway, till Harry Conroy overshot the mark and got what was coming to him. He sure didn't owe Harry anything, that he had need to shield him like he had done. Still, Rodway would wonder why he hadn't told it at first; and that little girl believed in Harry, and said he was "splendid!" Humph! He wondered if she really meant that. He squared his back to the house—and the memory of Jessie Conroy's eyes—and plodded across the field to the gate.

Now the sun was shining, and there was no possibility of getting lost. The way to the Cross L lay straight and plain before him.

Vaughan rode leisurely up over the crest of a ridge beyond which lay the home ranch of the Cross L. He hoped that Pink had arrived with less difficulty than he had experienced and had completed arrangements with "Wooden Shoes" Mielke, foreman of the Cross L.

His eyes searched wishfully the huddle of low-eaved cabins and the assortment of sheds and corrals for some sign of Wooden Shoes or Pink. But no one seemed to be about—except a big-bodied, bandy-legged individual, who appeared to be playfully chasing a big, bright bay stallion inside the large enclosure where stood the cabins.

Vaughan watched them impersonally. Vaughan was not particularly interested in him or his doings. It did occur to him, however, that if the fellow wanted to catch that brute, he ought to have sense enough to get a horse. No one but a plumb idiot would mill around in that snow afoot. He jogged down the slope at a shuffling trot, grinning tolerantly at the pantomime below.

He of the bandy-legs stopped, evidently out of breath; the stallion stopped also, snorting defiance. Vaughan heard him plainly, even at that distance. The horse arched his neck and watched the man warily, ready to be off at the first symptom of renewed hostilities—and Vaughan observed that a short rope hung from his halter, swaying as he moved.

Bandy-legs seemed to have an idea. He turned and scuttled to the nearest cabin, returning with what seemed a basin of oats, for he shook it enticingly and edged cautiously toward the horse. Vaughan could imagine him coaxing, with hypocritically endearing names, such as "Good old boy!" and "Steady now, Billy"—or whatever the horse's name might be. Vaughan chuckled to himself, and hoped the horse saw through the subterfuge.

Perhaps the horse chuckled also; at any rate, he stood quite still, equally prepared to bound away on the instant or to don the mask of docility. Bandy-legs drew nearer and nearer, shaking the basin briskly, like an old woman sifting meal. The horse waited, his nostrils quivering hungrily at the smell of the oats, and with an occasional nicker.

Bandy-legs went on tiptoes—or as nearly as he could in the snow—the basin at arm's length before. The dainty, flaring nostrils sniffed tentatively, dipped into the basin, and snuffed the oats about luxuriously—till he felt a stealthy hand seize the dangling rope. At the touch he snorted protest, and was off and away, upsetting Bandy-legs and the basin ignominiously into a high-piled drift.

BANDY-LEGS sat up, scraped the snow out of his collar and his ears, and swore. It was then that Vaughan appeared like an angel of deliverance.

"Want that horse caught?" he yelled cheerfully.

Bandy-legs lifted up his voice and bellowed things that should not be repeated verbatim. But Vaughan gathered that the man emphatically did want that so-and-so-and-then-some horse caught, and that it couldn't be done a blessed minute too soon. Whereat Vaughan smiled anew, with his face discreetly turned away from Bandy-legs, and took down his rope and widened the loop. Also, he turned Chub loose.

The stallion evidently sensed what new danger threatened his stolen freedom, and circled the yard with high, springy strides. Vaughan circled after, saw his chance, swirled the loop twice over his head, and hazarded a long throw.

Vaughan knew it for pure good luck that it landed right on the first cast, but to Bandy-legs it looked perfect and he regarded Vaughan with respect.

"Where shall I take him?" Vaughan asked, coming up with his captive, and with nothing but his eyes to show how he was laughing inwardly.

Bandy-legs crawled from the drift, still scraping snow from inside his collar, and gave many directions about going through a certain gate into such-and-such a corral; from there into a stable; and by seeming devious ways into a minutely described stall.

"All right," said Vaughan, cutting short the last needless details. "I guess I can find the trail." He started off, leading the stallion. Bandy-legs followed, and Chub, observing the departure of Dixie, ambled faithfully in the rear.

"Much obliged," conceded Bandy-legs, when the stallion was safely housed and tied securely. "Where are you headed for, young man?"

"Right here," Vaughan told him calmly, looosening Dixie's cinch. "I'm the long-lost top-hand that the Cross L's been watching the sky-line for, lo! these many moons, a-yearning for the privilege of handing me forty plunks about twice as fast as I've got 'em coming. Where's the boss?"

"Er—I'm him," confessed Bandy-legs meekly, and circled the two dubiously. "I guess you've heard of Eagle Creek Smith—I'm him. The Cross L belongs to me."

Vaughan let out an explosive sound and showed a row of nice teeth.

"Well, I ain't hard to please," Vaughan added. "I won't kick on that, I guess. I like your looks tolerable well, and I'm willing to take you on for a boss. If you do your part, I bet we'll get along fine. I'm Rowdy Vaughan, lately canned from the Horseshoe Bar."

"What for?" ventured Bandy-legs—rather, Eagle Creek—still circling Vaughan dubiously.

"What for was I canned?" repeated Vaughan easily. "Being a modest man, I hate to tell you. But the old man's son and me, we disagreed." He stood head and shoulders above Eagle Creek, and he smiled down upon him engagingly. Eagle Creek capitulated before the smile.

"Well, I ain't got any sons—that I know of," he said and grinned. "So I guess you can consider yourself a Cross L man till further notice."

"Why, sure!" The teeth gleamed again briefly. "That's what I've been telling you right along. Where's old Wooden Shoes? He's responsible for me being here."

"Gone to Chinook. He'll be back in a day or two."

"And a fellow named Perkins? Is he around?"

"Pink? Sure! He'll turn up. You'll probably see him in the bunkhouse." Eagle Creek shifted his feet awkwardly. "Say," he glanced uneasily behind him, "you don't want to let it get around that you sort of—hired me—see?"

"Of course not," Vaughan assured him. "I was only joshing. If you don't want me, just tell me to hit the sod."

"You stay right where you're at!"

HE had regained confidence in himself and his authority. Of a truth, this self-assured, straight-limbed young

man had rather dazed him. "Take your bed and war-bag up to the bunkhouse and make yourself to home till the boys get back. Say, where'd you get that pack-horse?"

The laughter went out of Vaughan's tawny eyes. The question hit a spot that was becoming sore. "I reckon I don't have to tell you that he's borrowed from Mr. Rodway," he said evenly. "But I didn't know it when he was palmed off on me. Rodway is going to get him back today. I stopped there last night."

"Oh!" Eagle Creek coughed apologetically, and said no word more while Vaughan led Chub back to the cabin which he had pointed out as the bunkhouse. He stood by while Vaughan loosened the pack and dragged it inside.

"I guess you can get located here," he said. "I ain't workin' more than three or four men just now, but there's quite a few of the boys stopping here. The Cross L's a regular hang-out for cowpunchers. You're a little early for the season, but I'll see that you have something to do, just to keep you out of devilment."

Vaughan's brows unbent. It would seem that Eagle Creek was capable of "joshing" also.

"It's up to you, old-timer," he said. "I'm strong and willing, and don't shy at anything but pitchforks."

Eagle Creek grinned. "This ain't no blamed cow-hospital," he gave as a parting shot. "All the hay that's shoveled on this ranch needn't hurt nobody's feelings."

With that he shut the door, and left Vaughan to acquaint himself with his new home.

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CHAPTER VI

Pink as "Chaperone"

VAUGHAN was sprawled ungracefully upon somebody's bunk—he neither knew nor cared whose—and he was snoring unmelodiously, and not dreaming a thing; for when a cowpuncher has nothing in particular to do, he sleeps to make up for the weary hours when he must be very wide awake. An avalanche descended upon his unwarned middle, and checked the rhythmic ebb and flow of sound. He squawked and came to life clawing viciously.

"How'd you take so long gettin' down here?" a voice asked plaintively in a soft treble. "Can't you boys from up north take the snow?"

Opening his eyes, Vaughan espied a familiar flame-colored neckerchief.

"Pink Perkins! By all that's bad! Get up off my diaphragm!"

Pink absent-mindedly kneaded his friend's stomach with his knuckles, and immediately found himself in a far corner. He came back, dimpling mischievously. He looked much more an angel than a fiend, for all his Angora chaps and flaming scarf.

"Your bed and war-bag's on my bunk; you're on Smoky's; and Dixie's makin' himself to home in the corral. By all them signs and tokens, I give a reckless guess you're here to stay a while. That right?" He prodded again at Vaughan's ribs.

"It is, Pink. You sure look good to me, you darned little cuss!"

Vaughan sat up and took a lightning inventory of the four or five other fellows lounging about. He must have slept pretty sound, he thought, not to have heard them come in.

Pink read the look, and bethought him of the necessary introduction.

"This is my side-kicker from over the line that you've heard about till you're

plumb weary, boys," he announced proudly. "His name is Rowdy Vaughan —bronco-peeler, crap fiend, and all-'round bad man. He ain't a safe companion, and you want to sleep with your six-guns cuddled under your right ears, and never, on no account, show him your backs. Boys, I'm afraid for you—but I wish you well."

"Pink, you need killing, and I'm tempted to live up to my rep," said Vaughan, grinning. "Read me the pedigree of your friends."

"Oh, they ain't no worse—when you get used to 'em. That long-legged jasper with the far-away look in his eyes is the Silent One. He once was a tenderfoot but he's convalescing."

The Silent One nodded carelessly, but with a quick, measuring glance that Vaughan liked.

"This unshaved savage is Smoky," Pink went on. "He's harmless. Over there's Jim Ellis and Bob Nevin; they've both turned a cow or two. That man hidin' behind the grin—you can see him if you look close—is Sunny Sam. You needn't take no notice of him, unless you've a mind to. He won't care—he's dead gentle."

As Pink broke off, Vaughan appraised his friend's cupid-bow mouth and dimples, a welcome sight after his lone ride down from Canada. Pink was not like any one else alive, Vaughan reflected. He was slight and girlish to look at. But appearances were deceitful. For those who tried to handle him knew that he was all muscle strung on steel wire. And plenty tough.

Pink made a cigarette, then offered Vaughan his tobacco-sack, and asked disarming questions about the Cypress Hills country. How was this girl?—and was that one married yet?—and did the other still grieve for him? As a matter of fact, he had yet to see the girl who could quicken his pulse a single beat, and for that reason it sometimes pleased him to affect susceptibility beyond that of other men.

"I saw down at the stables," Pink finally observed carelessly and in—for him—a very quiet voice, "that you've got Chub yet. That was a good deal I made for you with Conroy. You're hunk with him."

VAUGHAN glowered at him. "For heaven's sake, let up on that danged cayuse!" he growled. "I wish I'd never got sight of the little buzzard-head. Pink, that cayuse never saw Oregon. He was raised right on this flat, and he belongs to Rodway. I've got to lead him back there and turn him over today."

Pink took three puffs at his cigarette, and lifted his gaze to study Vaughan's gloom-filled face.

"Stolen?" he asked briefly.

"Stolen," Vaughan repeated disgustedly. "So was the whole blamed bunch, as near as I can make out."

Pink only looked at him for reply, then looked out the window at the blank glare of snow. The bunkhouse was quiet, Vaughan was suddenly aware. Most of the fellows had gone out. In a corner, a cloud of blue smoke rose from the pipe of the one man left in the room. To Vaughan, the Silent One's head seemed to come slowly alive out of that blue cloud. The mouth opened to speak, and in a quiet, even tone addressed Rowdy Vaughan.

"Did you ever meet up with a man named Bob Mahoney in your travels?" the Silent One asked him.

"No, can't say that I ever did," replied Vaughan, his mood transformed by his first intercourse in speech with this mysterious but strangely likable figure. "Why?"

"Just wondered," said the Silent One in a tone that might have conveyed a conviction that those two words explained fully his reason for an interest in some stranger named Bob Mahoney. The haze of smoke about him thickened as he drew heavily on his pipe, and he lapsed once more into that haze and into silence. He had evidently spoken his piece for the time.

"Ordinarily he doesn't talk much," said Pink later when, after dinner, he and Vaughan went down to the stables. "He likes you, though. That was a long conversation—for *him*."

"And who is this Bob Mahoney he wants to know about?" asked Vaughan.

"I never heard his name before this mornin'," Pink answered. "Remember, I just got here, too."

As they reached the corral fence they saw, near the stables, some distance away, the Silent One feeding the horses. That mysterious individual stopped his chores, stood up straight, and looked out across the white landscape. Facing him, Vaughan was aware that the Silent One was looking straight at him with a glance that said more than words could tell. When Pink next spoke, the Silent One resumed his chores.

"We might have guessed Harry Conroy wouldn't have a straight title to anything if he could make it crooked," Pink said. "He pays you back what he owes you in horseflesh that turns out to be somebody else's property!"

Pink leaned against the fence and kicked meditatively at a snow-covered rock.

"Anyway," Vaughan answered, "I borrowed Chub back from Rodway long enough to pack my bed over—borrowed the blame' little runty cayuse that cost me the fifty hard-earned dollars I was stupid enough to lend to Harry Conroy."

"I can tell you where to find Conroy, Rowdy," Pink volunteered, after a pause. "His headquarters, I've found, ain't so far from here. He hangs out with an outfit down the river—when he isn't followin' the rodeos. I'd sure like to fix him for this! You've got plenty of evidence, Rowdy. You can send him to prison. Why, man, it's a cinch!"

"I haven't lost Harry Conroy, so I ain't lookin' for him just now," growled Vaughan. "So long as he keeps out of reach, I won't ask any more of him. And, Pink, I wish you'd keep this quiet—about him bein' the man who had Chub. I told Rodway the fellow went north and got killed."

PINK looked like a cherub-faced child when he has been told there's no Santa Claus. He couldn't understand it.

"Sure, if you say so," he agreed dubiously. He eyed Vaughan. "How'd you happen to run across Rodway?" he asked guilelessly.

"I stopped there last night. I got to milling around in that storm, and ran across the schoolma'am who boards at Rodway's. Then Chub came alive and piloted us to the house. This morning Rodway claimed him—says the brand has been worked from a Roman four."

But Pink was not thinking of Chub to give his features that knowing leer.

"I knew it," he declared, with melancholy triumph. "It's schoolma'amitis that's given you softening of the vitals, and not Christian charity. It's a cinch you're wise that she's Harry's sister; I should think, Rowdy Vaughan, you'd had about enough of that brand of snake."

"There's nothing so snaky about her that I can see," Vaughan retorted indignantly. "She seemed right plucky in that blizzard."

"Well, I never heard anybody stand up and call Harry white-livered, when you come to that," Pink cut in tartly. "Anyway, you're a blamed fool. She's got a little tin god that she says prayers to regular. That's Brother Harry. And wouldn't he make the fine brother-in-law! He could borrow all your wages off of you, and when you went to make a pretty ride, he'd up and cut your latigo, and give you a fall. And he could work stolen horses off onto you, and you wouldn't give a hoot, 'cause Jessie says so."

"Pink, if you keep running her down, I'll stick your head in a snow bank," Vaughan threatened. "And you're the fellow that made the horse deal for me."

"You've sure got it bad," mourned Pink. "You wait till toward evening before you take that horse back. I'm going along to chaperone you, Rowdy. You aren't safe runnin' loose any more."

Vaughan cursed him companionably and told him to go along if he wanted to, and to look out he didn't throw up his own hands. Pink grumbled and swore—and did go along. But when they got there, Jessie Conroy greeted him like a very good friend; which sent Vaughan sulky, and kept him so all the evening. It semed to him that Pink was playing a double game, and when they

started home he told him so.

But Pink turned in his saddle and smiled so that his dimples showed plainly in the moonlight. "Chaperones who sit in a corner and look wise are the rankest kind of fakes," he explained. "When she was talking to me, she was letting you alone—see?"

Vaughan accepted the explanation silently, and stored it away in his memory. After that, by riding craftily, and by threats, and by much vituperation, he managed to reach Rodway's unchaperoned at least three times out of five—which was doing remarkably well, when one considers Pink.

CHAPTER VII

At Home at Cross L

IN two days Vaughan was quite at home on the Cross L. In a month he found himself transplanted from the smoke-laden air of the bunkhouse, and set off from the world in a line camp, with nothing to do but patrol the boggy banks of Milk River, where it was still unfenced and unclaimed by small ranchers and nesters. The only mitigation of his exile, so far as he could see, lay in the fact that he had Pink for a companion—and, he felt, in some secret way, the Silent One, whose name was Jim Hogan.

Gradually he became better acquainted with the Silent One, particularly since the three of them were frequently on patrol duty together. On the lonely stretches of the riverbank a cowpuncher accepted what companionship the moment offered, and loneliness itself had a mysterious way of drawing people closer together.

The Silent One complained that he could not keep supplied with reading-matter, and Pink bewailed the monotony of inaction. For, beyond watching the river to keep the cattle from miring in the mud lately released from frost grip, there was nothing to do.

According to the calendar, spring was well upon them, and the prairies would soon be flaunting new dresses of green. But May Day found the grass-land brown and lifeless, with a chill wind blowing over it. The cattle wandered as before—except that knock-kneed little calves trailed beside their lean mothers and clamored for full stomachs.

The Cross L cattle bore the brunt of the range famine, because Eagle Creek Smith was a stockman of the old school. His cattle must live on the open range, because they always had done so. Other men bought or leased large tracts of grass-land, and fenced them for just such an emergency, but not he.

Through the dry summer before, when other men read the ominous signs and hurriedly leased pasture-land and cut down their herds to what the fields would feed, Eagle Creek went calmly on as he had done always. He shipped what beef was fit—and that, of a truth, was not much—and settled down for the winter, trusting to winter snows and spring rains to refill the long-dry lakes and water-holes, and coat the levels anew with grass.

But the winter snows had failed to appear, and with the spring came no rain. "April showers" became a hideously ironical joke at nature's expense.

It is all very well for a man to cling stubbornly to precedent, but if he clings long enough, there comes a time when to cling becomes akin to crime. Eagle Creek Smith still stubbornly held that range-cattle should be kept to the range. He waited until May was fast merging to June, watching, from sheer habit, for the spring transformation of brown prairies into green.

When it did not come, and only the coulee sides and bottoms showed green among the brown, he accepted ruefully the unusual conditions which nature had thrust upon him, and started "Wooden Shoes" out with the wagons on the horse roundup, which is a preliminary to the roundup proper, as every one knows.

"I call that a bad job well done," Pink

remarked to Vaughan after a long silence, when the roundup was nearly over. "How we're going to keep that bunch of skeletons under us all summer is a guessing contest for fair. Wooden Shoes has got to give me about forty, instead of a dozen, if he wants me to hit 'er up on circle the way I'm used to. I bet their back-bones'll wear clean up through our saddles."

"Oh, I guess not," said Vaughan calmly. "They ain't so thin—and they'll pick up flesh. There's one I got my eye on—that blue roan. Anyway, I guess you can wiggle along with less than forty."

Pink shook his head thoughtfully and sighed. Pink loved good mounts, and the outlook did not please him. The roundup had camped, for the last time, on the river within easy riding distance of Camas. The next day's drive would bring them to the home ranch, where Eagle Creek was fuming over the lateness of the season, the condition of the range, and the June rains, which had thus far failed even to moisten decently the grass-roots.

"Let's ride over to Camas; all the other fellows have gone," Pink proposed listlessly.

VAUGHAN as listlessly consented. Camas as a town was neither interesting nor important, but when one has spent three long weeks communing with nature in her sulkiest and most unamiable mood, even a town without a railroad to its name may serve to relieve the monotony of living.

Gorgeous masses of purple and crimson clouds were piling high about the sun. Pink's face was tinged with the glow, and even Vaughan's lean, brown features were for the moment glorified. They rode knee to knee silently, thinking each his own thoughts the while they watched the sunset with eyes grown accustomed, but never indifferent, to its barbaric splendor.

Soon the west held none but the deeper tints. A meadow lark nearby cut the silence into haunting ripples of melody, stopped affrighted at their coming, and flew off into the dull glow of the west; his little body showed black against a crimson cloud. Out across the river a lone coyote yapped sharply, then trailed off into the weird plaint of his kind.

"Brother-in-law's in town today; Bob Nevin saw him," Pink remarked, when the coyote ceased wailing and held his peace.

"Who?" Vaughan, absorbed, had only half heard.

"Bob Nevin," repeated Pink naively.

"Don't get funny. Who did Bob see?"

"Brother-in-law. Yours, not mine. Jessie's tin god. If he's there yet, I bid for an invite to the barbecue. Maybe you'll kill the fattest maverick and fall on his neck."

"The maverick's?" Vaughan's brows were rather pinched together, but his tone told nothing.

"Naw; Harry Conroy's. A fellow's liable to do most any fool thing when he's got schoolma'amitis."

Vaughan leaned over and patted him caressingly upon the shoulder—a form of irony which Pink detested. "Don't get excited, sonny," he soothed. "Did you fetch your gun?"

"I sure did!" Pink drew a long breath of relief. "You needn't think I'm going to take chances on being no human colander. I've packed a gun for Harry Conroy ever since that horse deal. He's been makin' constant war-talks behind both our backs. Did I bring my gun? Well, I guess yes!"

"All the same, it'll suit me not at all to run up against him," said Vaughan quite frankly. He knew Pink would understand. Then he lifted his coat suggestively, to show the weapon concealed beneath, and smiled.

"Different here. You did have sense enough to be ready—and if you see him, and don't forget he's got a sister with a number two foot, danged if I don't fix you both a-plenty!" Pink settled his hat more firmly over his curls, and eyed Vaughan anxiously from under his lashes.

Vaughan caught the action and the look from the tail of his eye, and grinned at his horse's ears. Pink in warlike mood always made him think of a four-year-

old child playing pirate—with the difference that Pink was always in deadly earnest and would fight like a fiend.

For more reasons than one, he hoped they would not meet Harry Conroy. Jessie was still in ignorance of his real attitude toward her brother, and Vaughan wanted nothing more than to keep her so. The trouble was that he was quite certain to forget everything but his grievances, if ever he came face to face with Harry. Also, Pink would always fight quicker for his friends than for himself. So he hoped fervently that Harry Conroy had already ridden back whence he came, and there would be no unpleasantness.

Four or five Cross L horses stood meekly before the Come Again Saloon, so Vaughan and Pink added theirs to the gathering and went in. The Silent One looked up from his place at a round table in a far corner, and beckoned.

"We need another hand here," he said, when they went over to him. "These gentlemen are worried because they might be taken into high society some day, and they would be placed in a very embarrassing position through their ignorance of bridge-whist. I have very magnanimously consented to teach them the rudiments."

BOB NEVIN looked up, and then lowered an eyelid cautiously. "He's a liar. He offered to learn us how to play it. We bet him the drinks he didn't savvy the game himself. Set down, Pink, and I'll have you for my pretty pardner."

The Silent One shuffled the cards thoughtfully. "To make it seem like bona-fide bridge," he began, "we should have everybody playing."

"Aw, the common, ordinary brand is good enough," protested Bob. "I ain't in on any trimmings."

The Silent One smiled ever so slightly. "We should have prizes—or favors. Is there a store in town where one could buy something suitable?"

"They got codfish up here; I smelt it." suggested Jim Ellis.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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Him, the Silent One ignored.

"What do you say, boys, to a real, high society whist party? I'll invite the crowd, and be the hostess. And I'll serve punch."

"Come on, men, move up to the bar, and have one with me," called a new voice near the door.

"Meeting's adjourned," cried Jim Ellis, and got up to accept the invitation and range along the bar with the rest. He had not been particularly interested in bridge-whist, anyway.

The others remained seated, and the bartender called across to know what they would have. Pink cut the cards very carefully, and did not look up. Vaughan thrust both hands into his pockets and turned his square shoulders to the bar. He did not need to look; he knew that voice, with its shoddy heartiness. Harry Conroy!

Pink never flinched, but sat like a rock, unmoving, his back square with Vaughan's. "There's evidently some horse business in town," he said in a low voice out of the corner of his mouth at his friend.

Men began to observe their attitude, and looked at one another. In this attitude, Vaughan was obviously the leader. Pink was following suit. The Silent One retained his politeness, coldly refusing a drink on the grounds that he had had enough.

When one is asked to drink with another, he must comply or decline graciously, if he would not give a direct insult. Against this code of the West, Vaughan and Pink were deliberately offending. Harry Conroy took three long steps and laid a hand on Vaughan's shoulder—a hand which Vaughan shook off as though it burned.

"Say, stranger, are you too high-toned to drink with a common cow-puncher?" Conroy demanded sharply.

"No, sir," replied Vaughan, half-turning toward him. "But I'll be mighty thirsty before I drink with you."

His voice was even, but it cut. Conroy started in sudden recognition. The room stilled on the instant; it was as if every man of them had turned to a figure of clay. Harry Conroy had winced at sight of Vaughan's face—men saw that, and some of them wondered. Pink leaned back in his chair, every nerve tightened for the next move, and waited. It was Harry—handsome, sneering, a certain swaggering defiance in his pose—who first spoke.

"Oh, it's you, is it? I haven't seen you for some time. How's bronco fighting?" He laughed mockingly, with mouth and eyes maddeningly like Jessie's in teasing mood.

Vaughan could have killed him for the resemblance alone. His lids drooped sleepily over eyes that glittered. Conroy saw the sign, read it for danger; but he laughed again.

"You ought to have seen this bronco-peeler play slick poker, boys," he jeered recklessly. "He won't drink with me, 'cause I got off with the purse. He's a grouch—and I don't know as I blame him. He did get let down pretty hard, for a fact."

"Maybe he did play poker—but he didn't juggle horses, like you did, you skunk!" It was Pink—Pink, with big, long-lashed eyes purple with rage, and with a dead-white streak around his mouth, and a gun in his hand.

CONROY wheeled toward him, and if a new light of fear crept into his eyes, his lips belied it in a sneer. "Two of a kind!" he laughed. "So that's the story you brought over here, is it? Swell lot of good it'll do you!"

When Pink next spoke, his voice was sharper and fiercer: "And he didn't go payin' off his poker debts in pack-horses that was stolen so every cowhand in Montana could pick out the doctored brand mark!"

Pink's face flamed with rage till it was practically the color of his scarf; and something in that face warned Conroy. From one to the other of them, Conroy turned watchfully. Evidently he considered Pink the more uncertain of the two; and he was quite justified in so thinking. Pink was only waiting for a cue to use his gun; and if once he began using it, there was no telling

where or when he would leave off. So Conroy reached for his gun first.

As he did so Vaughan's fist suddenly spatted against his cheek with considerable force. Conroy tumbled, a cursing heap, against the foot-rail of the bar, scrambled up like a cat—a particularly vicious cat clawing for his six-shooter—and came at Vaughan murderously, despite the fact that Pink had insulted him more. Vaughan went into a crouch, his right hand dropping to his gun butt.

The Come Again would shortly have been filled with the pungent haze of burned powder, only that the bartender was a man of action. He hated brawls, and it did not matter to him who might be right or how just might be the quarrel. He slapped the gaping barrels of a sawed-off shotgun across the bar, and from the look of the weapon one might imagine many disagreeable things.

"Drop it! Cut it out!" he yelled. "You ain't makin' a slaughterpen out of this joint, I tell you. Put up those guns or else take 'em outside. If you fellers are bent on smokin' each other up, there's all kinds of room outdoors. Get! Vamoose! Hike!"

The Silent One was standing close to the bar. Before Conroy could move, or speak, the Silent One addressed him in tones that were very quiet, but so penetrating that everyone in the room heard and understood.

"Did you ever come up with a man named Bob Mahoney?" he asked Conroy.

Conroy's face visibly whitened, as every man in the Come Again noticed, at mention of Mahoney's name. Vaughan himself had scarcely recovered from amazement at the electric effect upon Conroy of hearing Mahoney mentioned, when Conroy wheeled, straight-backed and venomous, to the door.

"Whose business is it?" he shouted at the Silent One. Then, quickly, to Vaughan: "Come on out, if you aren't scared! It's two or three against one, and then some, by the looks of things. But I'll take you on singly or in bunches. I'm ready for the whole Cross L bunch. Come on, you white-livered coyotes."

Vaughan rushed for him, with Pink and the Silent One at his heels. Rowdy had forgotten that Harry Conroy ever had a sister of any sort whatsover. All he knew was that this man had done him much wrong, of the sort which comes near to being unforgivable, and that he had sneered insults that no man may overlook. All he thought of was to get his hands on him.

Outside, the dusky stillness caused all sounds to seem out of place; the faint starlight made all objects black and unfamiliar. Vaughan stopped just off the threshold, blinking at the darkness which held his enemy. It was strange that he did not find him at his elbow, he thought, and a suspicion came to him that Conroy was lying in wait. It would be like him. He stepped out of the yellow glare from a window and stood in a more friendly spot of shadow. Behind him, on the doorstep stood his two friends, blinking as he had done.

SUDDENLY there was a sound as of a wild animal snarling in the shadows, terminating explosively. It was a man clearing his throat violently and expectorating loudly on the sidewalk—evidently his equivalent of rapping on a table with a gavel for attention. In his hand was a gun, and he was aiming it.

"In the name of the law," he shouted as he rushed closer and confronted the three belligerently, covering them threateningly, "you're disturbin' the peace! We don't stand for anythin' like that in Camas. You're my prisoners—all of you!"

The edict semed to include even the bartender, peering over the shoulder of Bob Nevin, who struggled with several others for immediate passage through the doorway.

"I guess not, pardner," retorted Pink, facing him defiantly as though the marshal were not twice his size.

"You'll get a worse sentence for resistin' an officer of the law!" exclaimed the marshal savagely, lunging toward the offender.

But at that moment the Silent One, revealing himself as a strong one, too,

reached a long arm from the door-step, rapped the badge toter smartly on the head with his gun, then looked as matter-of-fact as though nothing at all had happened while the marshal squawked and went down in a formless heap.

"Come on boys!" the Silent One said coolly, but urgently. "I think we'd better go. Your friend seems to have vanished in thin air."

"No doubt in cahoots with this character you just bumped over," said Pink.

"Kind of jumpin' at conclusions, aren't you, Pink?" asked Vaughan evenly. "But believe me, boys, I hate leavin' this dump of a town with that skunk runnin' loose in it."

Grumbling mightily over what looked unpleasantly like retreat, Vaughan had to be pushed toward his horse, which he mounted only under protest. Likewise Pink, who was for staying and cleaning up the whole town. But the Silent One was firm, and there was that in his manner which compelled obedience.

Harry Conroy might have been an optical—and aural—illusion, for all the trace there was of him. But when the three rode out into the little street, a bullet pinged close to Vaughan's left ear, and the red bark of a revolver spat viciously from a black shadow beside the Come Again.

Vaughan and the two turned and rode back, shooting blindly at the place, but the shadow yawned silently before them and gave no sign. Then the Silent One, observing that the marshal was getting up on a pair of very unsteady legs, again assumed the leadership, and fairly forced Vaughan and Pink into the homeward trail.

LOOK FORWARD TO—

TEXAS TRAIL BOSS

A Short Action Novel of the Range

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—NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER VIII

Vaughan Discovers a Rival

WITH nice calculation, Vaughan met Jessie Conroy just as she left the schoolhouse, and noted with much satisfaction that she was riding alone. Jessie Conroy, if she had been observant, must have seen the light of some fixed purpose shining in his eyes, for Vaughan was resolved to make her a partner in his dreams of matters domestic. And, of a truth, his easy assurance was the thinnest of cloaks to hide his inner agitation.

"The roundup just got in yesterday afternoon," he told her as he swung into the trail beside her. "We're going to start out again tomorrow, so this is about the only chance I'll have to see you for a while."

"I knew the round-up must be in," said Jessie Conroy calmly. "I heard that you were in Camas a night or two ago."

Inwardly, Vaughan dodged. "We camped close to Camas," he conceded guardedly. "A lot of us fellows rode into town."

"Yes, so Harry told me," she said. "He came over to see me yesterday. He is going to leave—has already, in fact. He has a fine position offered him by the Indian Agent in Belknap. The agent used to be a friend of Father's." She looked at Vaughan, and then went straight at what was in the minds of both.

"I'm sorry to hear, Mr. Vaughan, that you are on bad terms with my brother. What was the trouble?" She turned her head and smiled at him—but the smile did not bring his lips to answer; it was unpleasantly like the way Harry Conroy smiled when he had had business afoot.

Vaughan scented trouble and parried. "Men can't always get along agreeably together."

"And you disagree with a man rath-

er emphatically, I should judge. Harry said you knocked him down." Politeness ruled her voice, but cheeks and eyes were aflame.

"I did. And of course he told you how he finally took a shot at me from a dark corner, outside."

Vaughan's eyes, it would seem, had kindled from the fire that blazed from hers.

"No, he didn't—but I—you struck him first."

"Hitting a man with your fist in a fight is one thing," said Vaughan with decision. "Shooting at him from ambush is another."

"Harry shouldn't have done that," she admitted with dignity. "But why wouldn't you take a drink with him? Not that I approve of drinking—I wish Harry wouldn't do such things—but he said it was an insult the way you refused."

"Jessie!"

"Miss Conroy, please."

"Jessie." He repeated the name stubbornly. "I think we'd better drop that subject. You don't understand the case; and, anyway, I didn't come here to discuss your brother. Our trouble is long standing, and if I insulted him you ought to know I had a reason. I never came whining to you about him, and it don't speak well for him that he hot-footed over to you with his version. I suppose he'd heard about me—er—going to see you, and wanted to queer me. I hope you'll take my word for it, Jessie, that I've never harmed him. All the trouble he's made for himself, one way and another.

"But what I came over for today concerns just you and me. I wanted to ask you if you'll marry me. I might put it more artistically, Jessie, but that's what I mean, and—I mean all the things I'd like to say and can't." He stopped and smiled at her, wistfully whimsical. "I've been three weeks getting my feelings into proper words, Jessie, and coming over here I had a speech thought out that sure did justice to my subject. But all I can remember of it is just that I want you for always."

THE girl looked away from him, but he could see a deeper tint of red in her cheek. It seemed a long time before she said anything. Then:

"But you've forgotten about Harry. He's my brother, and he'd be—er—you wouldn't want him related—to you."

"Jessie, I've got an account a-plenty against your brother; but I'll cross it off. It won't be hard to do—for you. I've thought of all that. A man can forgive a whole lot in the brother of the woman he loves." He leaned toward her, adding honestly: "I can't promise you I'll ever get to like him, Jessie, but I'll keep my hands off him, and I'll treat him civil. And if you knew all he's done, you'd know that's quite a large-sized contract."

Jessie Conroy became much interested in the ears of her horse.

"The only thing to decide is whether you like me enough," Vaughan went on. "If you do, we'll sure be happy. Never mind Harry."

"You're very generous," she flared, "telling me to never mind Harry, my own brother—the only near relative I've got. I know he's impulsive, and quick-tempered, perhaps. But he needs me all the more. Do you think I'll turn against him, even for you?"

That "even" may have been a slip, but it heartened Vaughan immensely. "I don't ask you to," he told her gently. "I only want you not to turn against me."

"I do wish you two would be sensible, and stop quarreling." She glanced at him briefly.

"I'm willing to cut it out—I told you that. I can't answer for him, though. Besides, he's likely to do things that will make me *have* to fight him." Vaughan sighed, wishing Harry Conroy in Australia, or some place equally remote.

Jessie Conroy suddenly resolved to be strictly just; and when a young woman sets about being deliberately just, the Lord pity him whom she judges!

"Before I answer you, I must know just what all this is about," she said firmly. "I want to hear both sides. I'm sure Harry wouldn't do anything mean. Do you think he would?"

Vaughan was dissentingly silent.

"Do you really, in your heart, believe that Harry would knowingly be guilty of anything mean?" Her eyes plainly told the answer she wanted to hear.

Vaughan looked into them, hesitated, and clung tenaciously to his convictions. "Yes, I do. I know Harry pretty well, Jessie." His face showed how much he hated to say it.

"I'm afraid you are very prejudiced." She sighed. "But go on; tell me just what you have against Harry. I'm sure it can all be explained away, only I must hear what it is."

Vaughan regarded her, puzzled, pleading, the look of a lost dog in his expression. How he was to comply he did not know. To tell her would be brutal, would make him feel like a hangman! Not to tell her was like hanging on the gallows himself. And she believed so in Harry, she wouldn't listen. Even if she did, he thought bitterly, she would hate him for destroying her faith. He was at the mercy of a woman's justice.

"Don't you see you're putting me in a mighty tight spot," he protested. "You're a heap better off not to know. He's your brother. I wish you'd take my word that I'll drop the whole thing right where it is. Harry's had all the best of it, so far. We'll let it stand that way."

Her eyes met him coldly. "Are you afraid to let me judge between you? What did he do? Daren't you tell?"

Vaughan's lids drooped ominously. "If you call that a dare," he said grimly, "I'll tell you, fast enough. I was a friend to him when he needed one mighty bad. I helped him. And to show his gratitude, he gave me the double-cross, in more ways than one. There are things that are best left in a man's world, Jessie. I won't go into details."

"Oh, you won't go into details!" Scorn filled her eyes and voice. "Are they so trivial, then? You tell me what you did for Harry—playing Good Samaritan. I don't know what you did for him. Harry, let me tell you, has property of his own! I can't see why he should ever be in need of charity. You're like all the rest. You hint things against him but I believe it's just jealousy. You can't come out honestly and tell me a single instance where he has harmed you, or has done anything worse than other high-spirited young men. Not one of you can tell me a thing against him!"

THE cowboy looked at her and then nodded slowly.

"It wouldn't do any good to tell you," Vaughan retorted. "You think he's just lacking wings to be an angel. I hope to God you'll always be able to think so! The fact is nobody wants to jar your faith, any more than I do."

"I must say your actions don't bear out your words. You've just been trying to turn me against him. Nobody's tried to jar my faith any more than you have."

"I haven't. I've been trying to convince you that I want you, anyway, and Harry needn't come between us."

"In other words, you're willing to overlook my being Harry's sister. I appreciate your generosity, I'm sure." Her tone burned with irony.

"I didn't mean that."

"Then you won't overlook it? How very unfortunate! Because I can't help the relationship."

"Would you, if you could?" he asked rashly.

"Certainly not!"

"I'm afraid we're getting off the trail," he said tactfully. "I asked you a while back if you'd marry me."

"And I said I must hear both sides of your trouble with Harry before I could answer."

"And after you heard both sides, you'd take his part, anyway," Vaughan replied disconsolately.

"Not—not if I found he was guilty of —of all you—insinuate," she stammered. "I should be perfectly just."

She really believed that. Vaughan didn't. He was silent for a considerable time, because he believed there was no use pursuing the subject when it was getting hotter and hotter and would only burn both of them if they got too close to the fire unprepared. How could

it ever be discussed between them? Yet how—or how long—could it be avoided? As he watched Jessie Conroy, her face and pretty lips set firmly and her eyes flashing as she looked off to the distant hills, he all but persuaded himself he loved Harry Conroy, if that was a necessary accompaniment of his love for Jessie! Then his whole body stiffened as he looked—in love, in torment, and with helplessness—at the girl and felt himself at one with her as he had never known harmony or love, or whatever it was, with anyone in the world before, and as he feared he would never know it again if somehow this didn't work out right now.

"Jessie," he murmured softly, "I'm dyin' to take you in my arms and make things between us what they ought to be. This has got to be cleared up. And meanwhile, I'll respect your loyalty to your brother. Only tell me yes or no now! And promise me you won't let him come between us."

"I can't help it," she replied simply, as helplessly as he. "All I know is that we could never agree, or be happy, this way. The same thing would always keep forcing itself between us, whether we meant it to or not, until we settle it!"

There is nothing so helpless as helpless love, unable to stop loving, yet unable to touch the thing loved. And far worse is the plight of the lovers when, not external bars and distances keep them apart, but inner compulsions that are even more forbidding. Under such circumstances, distrust may flare up and things be said that afterward one regrets. Vaughan's tone was full of pleading when he next spoke.

"You aren't in—" he stammered, "—in love with anybody else, are you, Jessie?"

"How can you talk about love where everything around us is hate?" she asked angrily. "And if you do want to know, Mr. Vaughan, there is a man wants to marry me."

"But, Jessie," he pleaded, "I've never seen you out with any one around here."

"He is not from around here," was the girl's reply.

"But do you love him?"

"I'm not talking about love, I tell you, with hate in the air—and in your heart!"

"But Jessie!"

"There can be no 'buts' about it, Mr. Vaughan," she cried, as though she had made a decision. "You and Harry can't settle your fight amicably, and you apparently can't take a woman into your confidence in your—your 'man's world,' anyway."

"Jessie," he answered, "let's at least be friends. Who's the man that wants to marry you? You owe that bit of information to the fellow that really loves you with all his heart."

"He's an older man," Jessie Conroy replied, "and if you'll take the information as from friend to friend, he's a ranch owner up beyond Chinook. And he has property all over the West. He's rich."

"But do you *love* him, Jessie?" Vaughan pleaded. "You wouldn't be happy otherwise."

"'Love,'" the girl replied quietly, "is not an easy word to throw around. But I think I could live very happily, and comfortably, with Mr. Mahoney!"

So saying, she rode into the Rodway yard, feeling very just and virtuous, no doubt, and leaving Vaughan thunderstruck. His sentiments toward her precious brother were little short of a desire to commit manslaughter; but even the conflict between his love for Jessie Conroy and the account he had to settle with her brother faded into the background of his thoughts in the light of this new mystery—his rival for Jessie Conroy.

Mahoney! Mahoney!

Smashing Action Novels
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CHAPTER IX

Pink in a Mood

SOON after Rowdy Vaughan had returned to the Cross L, which he did with considerable dispatch, he hot-footed it to the bunkhouse, determined to talk, not this time to Pink, but to the Silent One. There he found both. Pink was quick to penetrate his uneasy state of mind.

"Let me squint at you, Rowdy," he said, with a keen glance. "You look as if two bottoms had fallen out of your world."

The Silent One said nothing, and started to walk away, but Vaughan extended a restraining hand.

"Jim!" he said. "Please stay! I've got to talk to you."

All three retreated to a far corner of the bunkhouse. As they sat down on some boxes, the Silent One lit his pipe and Pink rolled a cigarette. Vaughan struck right into the subject.

"Jim," he said, "did *you* ever know a man named Mahoney?"

The Silent One examined Vaughan long and searchingly. "That has, indeed, been one of the pleasures of my life, as pleasures go," he said, while his expression remained frozen as though the thought gave him anything but pleasure.

"Who is he, anyway?" Vaughan asked simply.

"Did you meet him?" the Silent One countered.

"No, but I finally heard about him."

Pink was all ears. "You must have been hearin' talk over at Rodway's," he opined.

Vaughan, for once, did not try to avoid mentioning her name. "I've been hearin' talk," he said, "from Jessie Conroy."

"I don't know what you've been hearing," the Silent One said, "but for your own information, Bob Mahoney is a ranchman, and a big one. He lives over beyond Chinook. But that is only one of his properties. For Mahoney is an important character in the West. He is always traveling to take care of his many interests. Wyoming—Idaho—Montana."

"A big operator!" Vaughan exclaimed.

"And a shrewd one," answered the Silent One. "He's gifted with the remarkable faculty of having no conscience at all. His fortunate attribute has placed him at the top of the world, financially speaking, out here in these parts."

"How did you meet him? Did you work for him?"

"No, I didn't," the Silent One went on, warming up to his subject in an outwardly expressionless way. "My family had the misfortune to own a small ranch over at Big Fork, in Flathead County. My father had been working it most of his life and had made a good thing of it. Now and then he added to his holdings, buying up land around the place. His backer all the time was a friend, so it looked, named Mahoney.

"Mahoney led my dad on to buy and expand, and let him win in the beginning, like in a poker game. Then, all of a sudden, when he had him extended where he wanted him, Mahoney put the screws on, and the ranch went to Mahoney. That's how he's got his holdings all over the Northwest. It looks beautiful—from a distance. A fine, upstanding citizen of the West. Bah! My parents all but starved, and Dad died a few months later from the shock. Then Mother followed my brother a thousand miles away. Yes, sir, Mahoney ruined my family, all right."

"Where'd the coyote come from?" asked Pink.

"From the Middle West," the Silent One went on. "Chicago or thereabouts. He was a stock promoter there and in the East. Tried at one time to sell my Dad some railroad securities. Dad tried a little of it, but soon discovered it was money thrown away. Everything Mahoney turned his hand to turned out wonderfully—for Mahoney—but for nobody else."

Pink listened—for the most part, subdued for him. He was always that way when he was in the company of the Silent One, particularly when the Silent One chose to talk. Now he interrupted.

"And why are we wastin' our time going on about that heartless, thievin' critter?" he asked. "My friend Rowdy hears somethin' over at Rodway's from *Miss Conroy*"—Pink snarled out the words—"then suddenly we have to spend the night discussing one of the meanest skunks in the West!"

VAUGHAN brought the whole affair out into the open. "I know I'm with friends," he said. "The truth is, boys, that this Mahoney has asked Jessie Conroy to become his wife."

"Good!" exclaimed the irrepressible Pink. "That's the best news I've heard these many months. It all cancels out. The sister of the Conroy coyote marries the Mahoney skunk. That saves you, Rowdy."

"But it so happens, Pink," said Vaughan, "that the sister of the Conroy coyote is a very fine young woman. And she isn't in love with Mahoney. And she doesn't know Mahoney is a skunk, nor that her brother Harry is, either. And I can't tell her."

"So you can't tell her!" snorted Pink. "Rowdy, you're not makin' out very well with that girl, and—mark my words—you better watch your step. She'll land you in trouble."

"The only trouble is," Vaughan explained, "that Conroy got in his work there, too. He beat me to her and queered me for good, by the books. If she takes up with Mahoney, it will be because she's beaten to a standstill and doesn't know anything else to do."

"Huh!" said Pink. "I wouldn't waste much time worrying over her if she's that easy turned."

"She's all right," Vaughan leaped to her defense. "I don't know as I blame her; she takes the stand any sister would take. She wants to know all about the trouble, and hear both sides, she said, so she could judge which was to blame. I guess she's got her heart set on being peacemaker. I know one thing: she likes me, all right."

"I don't see how he queered you any, then," said the puzzled Pink. "She sure couldn't take his part after you'd told her all he's done."

Vaughan turned on him savagely. "You little chump, do you think I told her? Right there's the trouble. He told his story; and when she asked for mine, I couldn't say anything. She's his sister."

"You—didn't—tell!" Pink leaned back and stared. "Rowdy Vaughan, there's times when even your friends can't disguise the fact that you act plumb batty. You let Conroy do you dirt that any other man would have killed him on bare suspicion for doing, and you never told her when she asked you to! How you lent him money and he paid you back in stolen horseflesh!"

"Pink, cut it out!" Rowdy glowered down at him. "I guess I don't need to be reminded of all those things. But are they the things a man can tell a girl about her brother? Pink, you're about as unfeeling a little devil as I ever run across. Maybe you'd have told her, but I couldn't. So it's all off."

He turned away and stared unseeingly at the rim of hills that hid the place where Jessie lived. She seemed very far away from him just then, and very, very desirable. He had never before realized just how much he cared.

"You can just bet I'd have told her!" said Pink, watching Vaughan's averted face. "She ain't goin' to be bowed down by that load of ignorance much longer, either. If she don't get Harry Conroy's pedigree straight out, without the varnish, it'll be because I ain't next to all his past."

But Vaughan, glooming among the debris of certain pet aircastles, neither heard nor wanted to hear Pink's wrathful mutterings. As a matter of fact, it was not till Pink clattered out of the yard on Mascot that Vaughan became aware he was missing. Even then it did not occur to him to wonder where Pink was going.

EAGLE CREEK SMITH, had at last reached the point where he must face new conditions and change established customs. He could no longer ignore the barrenness of the range, or close his eyes to the grim fact that his cattle were facing starvation—and that of all times in June, when they should be taking on flesh.

When he finally did confess to himself that things couldn't go on like that, others had been before him in leasing and buying land, until only the dry benches were left to him and his hungry herds.

But Eagle Creek was a man of resource. When the roundup pulled in and Wooden Shoes reported to him the general state of the cattle, telling of the water-holes newly fenced and of creek bottoms gobbled by men more farseeing than he, Eagle Creek took twenty-four hours to adjust himself to the situation and to meet the crisis before him. His own land, as range for his thousands of cattle, was too pitifully inadequate for a second thought. He must look elsewhere for the correct answer to his problem.

When Vaughan rode apathetically up to the stable, Pink came striding out of the corral to meet him big with news. "Oh, doctor! We're up against it plenty now," he greeted, with his dimples at their deepest.

"Huh!" grunted Vaughan crossly. "What's hurting you, Pink?"

"Forecasting the future," Pink retorted. "Eagle Creek has come alive, and has waked up sudden to the fact that his cattle look like the tailings of a wash-board factory. He's got busy—and we're sure going to. We're due to hit the grit out of here in the first beams of rosy morn, and do a record stunt at gathering cattle."

"Well, we were going to, anyhow," Vaughan cut in.

"But that's only the prelude, old-timer. We've got to take 'em across country to the Belknap reservation. Eagle Creek went to town and telegraphed, and got the refusal of it for pasturage. He ain't so slow, once he gets started. But if you've ever rode over them dried-up benches, you savvy the merry party we'll be when we arrive. I've seen jack-rabbits packing their lunch along over there."

Vaughan dropped his saddle spitefully to the ground. "Belknap is where our friend Conroy has just gone to fill a splendid position."

Pink thoughtfully blew the ashes from his cigarette. "Harry Conroy would fill one position fine. Some of these days I'll offer it to him. I don't know anybody that'd look nicer in a coffin than that jasper. If he's gone to Belknap, that's likely the position he'll fill, all right."

Vaughan said nothing, but as he watched Pink he was suddenly aware that more was stirring in the brain behind those golden curls than met the eye. It came to him.

"Pink! Where have you been?"

"Yep!" admitted the little man. "I been over to see her. If you can't take care of yourself, somebody has to do the job for you. And that chore falls to your friends."

"Pink! You told her?"

"Brother, I sure did!"

"How'd you do it?"

"I told her that since my best friend was too decent to shake her faith in her brother, I had to do it for him. She tried to run out on me, but I followed her and made her listen. So she heard the whole tale—the money, the poker game, the stolen horse and all the rest."

"What did she say?"

"Said she didn't believe it. But I told her she'd live to see the day when she would have to believe it, and her brother would be behind bars, where he belonged, or, more likely, decoratin' a cottonwood tree."

"Pink!" Vaughan exclaimed weakly. "I said you had no heart! She'll never speak to me again! What choice will she have? You had no right to do that!"

"When a man is too lily-livered to do for himself," Pink said, "his friends have to do for him. If she throws you over for that, then you got to accept her as the same breed as her brother and call it quits!"

WHEN Pink was in such a mood, there was no dealing with him. So Vaughan walked away, feeling as though the bottom had dropped out of the universe. In the days immediately following he didn't talk much to Pink, nor to anyone, he felt so low and discouraged. And he didn't even see his schoolma'am.

Eagle Creek changed the destiny of everyone at the Cross L at exactly that juncture. He ordered a special trail drive. Almost overnight, it seemed, four thousand weary cattle crawled up the long ridge which divided Chin Coulee from Quitter Creek. Pink, riding point, opposite the Silent One, twisted around in his saddle and looked back at the slow-moving river of horns and backs veiled in a gray dust cloud. Down the line at intervals rode the others, humped listlessly in their saddles, their hat brims pulled low over tired eyes that smarted with dust and wind and burning heat.

Pink sighed, and wished lonesomely that it was Vaughan riding point with him, instead of the Silent One, who grew even more silent as the day dragged leadenly to mid-afternoon. Pink could endure anything better than being left to his thoughts and to the complaining herd for company.

He took off his hat and eyed with disfavor a line-backed, dry cow, with one horn tipped rakishly toward her speckled nose. She blinked silently at wind and heat, and forged steadily ahead, up-hill and down coulee, always in the lead, always walking, walking, like an automaton. Her energy in the face of all the dry, dreary days, rasped Pink's nerves unbearably. For nearly a week he had ridden left point, and always that line-backed cow with the down-crumpled horn walked and walked, a length ahead of her most intrepid followers.

He leaned from his saddle, picked up a rock from the barren, yellow hillside, and threw it at the cow spitefully. The rock bounced off her lean rump. She grunted and broke into a shuffling trot, her dragging hoofs kicking up an extra amount of dust, which blew straight into Pink's face.

"Aw, cut it out!" he shouted petulantly. "You're sure the limit, without doing any stunts at sprinting up-hill. Ain't you got any nerves, you blamed old skate? Can't you realize the kind of deal you're up against? Here's cattle that's got you skinned for looks, old girl, and they know it's coming blamed tough; and you just bat your eyes and peg along like you enjoyed it. Bawl, or something, can't you? Drop back a foot and act human!"

The Silent One looked across at him with a tired smile. "Let her go, Pink, and pray for more like her," he called out. "There'll be enough of them dropping back presently."

PINK threw one leg around the horn and rode sidewise, made him a cigarette, and tried to forget the cow.

They were on the very peak of the ridge now, and the hill sloped smoothly down before them to the bluff which bounded Quitter Creek. Far down, a tiny black speck in the coulee-bottom, they could see Wooden Shoes riding along the creek bank, scouting for water. From the way he rode, and from the fact that camp was nowhere in sight, Pink guessed shrewdly that his quest was in vain.

The marching line split at the brow of the bluff. The line-backed cow lowered her head a bit and went unfaltering down the parched, gravel-coated hill, followed by a few hundred of the freshest. Then the stream stopped flowing, and Pink and the Silent One rode back up the bluff to where the bulk of the footsore herd, their senses dulled by hunger and weariness and choking thirst, sniffed at the gravel that promised agony to their bruised hoofs, and balked at the ordeal. Others straggled up, bunched against the rebels, and stood stolidly where they were.

Pink galloped on down the crawling line. "Forward, the Standard Oil Brigade!" he yelled whimsically as he went.

The cowboys heard—and understood. They left their places and went forward

at a lope, and Pink rode back to the coulee edge, untying his slicker as he went. The Silent One was already off his horse and shouting hoarsely as he whacked with his slicker at the sulky, massed cattle. Pink rode in and did the same. It was not the first time this thing had happened, and from a diversion it was verging closely on the monotonous. Presently, even a rank tenderfoot must have caught the significance of Pink's military expression. The Standard Oil Brigade was at the front in force.

Cowboys, swinging five-gallon oil-cans, picked up from scattered sheep camps and carried many a weary mile for just such an emergency, were charging the bunch intrepidly. Others made shift with flat sirup-cans with pebbles inside. A few, like Pink and the Silent One, flapped their slickers till their arms ached. Anything, everything that would make a din and startle the cattle out of their lethargy, was pressed into service.

But they might have been raised in a barnyard and fed cabbage leaves from back door-steps, for all the excitement they showed. Cattle that three months ago—or a month—would run, head and tail high in the air, at sight of a man on foot, backed away from a rattling, banging cube of gleaming tin, or turned and faced the thing dull-eyed and apathetic.

In time, however, they gave way doggedly before the onslaught. A few were forced shrinkingly down the hill. Others followed gingerly, until the line lengthened and flowed, a sluggish, brown-red stream, into the coulee and across to Quitter Creek.

Here the leaders were browsing greedily along the banks. They had emptied the few holes that had still held a meager store of brackish water, and so the mutinous bulk of the herd sniffed at the trampled, muddy spots and bellowed their disappointment.

Wooden Shoes rode up and surveyed the half-maddened animals gloomily. "Push 'em on, boys," he said. "They's nothing for 'em here. I've sent the wagons on to Red Willow. We'll try that next. Push 'em along all you can, while I go on ahead and see."

With tin-cans, slickers, and much vituperation, they forced the herd up the coulee side and strung them out again on the trail. The line-backed cow walked and walked in the lead before Pink's querulous gaze, and the others plodded listlessly after. The gray dust-cloud formed anew over their slow-moving backs, and the cowboys humped over in their saddles and rode and rode, with the hot sun beating aslant in their dirt-grimed faces, and with the wind blowing and blowing.

THE Cross L boys were becoming a jaded lot of hollow-eyed men, whose nerves were rasped raw with long hours and longer days in the saddle. Pink's cheeks no longer made his name appropriate, and he was not the only one who grew fretful over small things. Vaughan had been heard, more than once lately, to anathematize viciously the prairie-dogs for standing on their tails and *chip-chip-chipping* at them as they went by. And though the Silent One did not swear, he carried rocks in his pockets, and threw them with venomous precision at every "dog" that showed his impertinent nose out of a burrow within range. As for Pink, he vented his spleen on the line-backed cow.

So they walked and walked and walked.

The cattle balked at another hill, and all the tin-cans and slickers in the crowd could scarcely move them. The wind dropped with the sun, and the clouds glowed gorgeously above them, getting scant notice, except that they told eloquently of the coming night. And there were yet miles—long, rough, heart-breaking miles—for the outfit to put behind them before they could hope for the things their tired bodies craved: supper and dreamless sleep.

When the last of the herd had sidled, under protest, down the long hill to the flat, dusk was pushing the horizon closer upon them, mile by mile. They crawled sinuously out upon the welcome level, the hill loomed ghostly and black behind

them. A mile out, Wooden Shoes rode out of the gloom and met the point. He turned and rode beside Pink.

"You'll have to swing 'em north," he greeted. "Red Willow's plumb dry—all but in the Rockin' R field. No use askin' old Mullen to let us in there; we'll just go. I sent the wagons through the fence, and you'll find camp about a mile up from the mouth of the big coulee. You swing 'em 'round the end of this bench, and hit that big coulee at the head. When you come to the fence, tear it down. There's awful good grass in that field!"

"All right," said Pink cheerfully.

It was in open defiance of range etiquette but their need was desperate. The only thing about it Pink did not like was the long detour they must make. He called the news across to the Silent One, after Wooden Shoes had gone on down the line, and they swung the point gradually to the left.

Before that drive was over, Pink had vowed many times to leave the range forever and never to turn another cow—besides a good many other foolish things which would be forgotten, once he had a good sleep.

Vaughan, riding swing, half-way down the herd, had grown exceedingly pessimistic regarding Jessie Conroy, and decided that there was no sense in thinking about her all the time the way he had been doing. Also, he told himself savagely that if her brother ever crossed his trail again, there would be something doing. This thing of letting a cur like that run roughshod over a man on account of a girl who didn't care was plumb idiotic. And beside him the cattle walked and walked and walked, a dim, moving mass in the quiet July night.

CHAPTER X

Harry Conroy at Home

LATE the next morning they got under way; for they had not reached camp until nearly midnight, and Wooden Shoes was determined the cattle should have one good feed and all the water they wanted to compensate for the hard drive the day before.

Pink rode out with Vaughan to the herd—a heavy-lidded, gloomy Vaughan he was, and not amiably inclined toward the small talk of the range. But Pink had slept five whole hours and was almost his normal self; which means that speech was not to be denied him.

"What are you mourning over?" he bantered. "Mad because the reservation's so close?"

"Sure," assented Vaughan, with deep sarcasm.

"That's what I thought. Studying up the nicest way of giving brother-in-law

[*Turn page*]

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"

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the glad hand, ain't you?"

"He's no relation of mine—and never will be," said Vaughan curtly. "And I'll thank you, Pink, to drop that subject for good and all."

"Down she goes," assented Pink, quite unperturbed. "But the cards ain't all turned yet, you want to remember. I wouldn't pass on the hand you've got. If I wanted a girl right bad, Rowdy. I'd wait till I got refused before I'd quit."

"Seems to me you've changed your politics lately," Vaughan retorted. "A while back you were cussing the whole business; and now you're worse than an old maid aunt. Pink, you may not be wise to the fact, but you sure are an inconsistent little devil."

"Are you going to hunt Conroy up?"

"I told you to drop that."

"Did you? All right, then. Only I hope you didn't leave your gun packed away in your bedroll," he said.

"Take a look," Vaughan suggested grimly.

Pink laughed in a particularly infectious way he had, and, before he quite knew it, Vaughan was laughing, also. After that the world looked less forlorn than it had, and the day's work less distasteful. Pink, having accomplished his purpose, was content to turn the subject.

"There's old Liney," he pointed her out to Vaughan, "fresh as a meadowlark. I had a big grouch against her yesterday, just because she batted her eyes and kept putting one foot ahead of the other. I could have killed her. But she's all right, that old girl. The way she led out down that black coulee last night wasn't slow! Say, she's an ambitious old party. I wish you was riding point with me, Rowdy. The Silent One talks just about as much as that old cow. He sure loves to live up to his rep."

"Oh, go on to work," Vaughan cried. "You make me think of a magpie." All the same, he looked after him with smiling lips and eyes that forgot their gloom. He even whistled while he helped round up the scattered herd, making it ready for what every man in the outfit comforted himself with thinking of it as the last day's drive. After long weeks of trailing lean herds over barren, wind-brushed hills, the last day meant much to them.

They crossed the Rocking R field, took down four panels of fence, passed out, and carefully put the fence up again behind them. Before them stretched level plain for two miles. Beyond that, a high rocky ridge that promised some trouble with the herd, and after that more plain and a coulee or two, and then, on a far slope—the reservation.

The cattle, rested and fed, walked briskly. The ridge neared perceptibly. Pink's shrill whistle carried far back down the line and mingled pleasantly with the voices calling to one another across the herd. Not a man was humped listlessly in his saddle. Instead, they rode with shoulders back and hats at divers jaunty angles to keep the sun from shining in eyes that faced the future cheerfully.

THE herd steadily climbed the ridge, choosing the smoothest path and the easiest slope. Pink assured the line-back cow that she was a peach, and told her to "go to it, old girl." The Silent One's pockets were quite empty of rocks, and the prairie-dogs *chipped* and flirted their funny little tails unassailed. And Vaughan, from wondering what had made Pink change his attitude so abruptly, began to plan industriously the next meeting with Jessie Conroy, and to build a new castle that was higher and airier than any he had ever before attempted.

The point gained the top of the ridge, and Pink turned and swung his hat jubilantly at the others. The reservation was in sight, though it lay several miles distant. But in that clear air one could distinguish the line fence—if one had the eye of faith and knew just where to look. Presently Pink observed a familiar horseman climbing the ridge to meet them.

"Eagle Creek's coming," he shouted to the man behind. "Come alive, there, and don't let 'em roam all over the map. Get some style on you!"

Those who heard laughed; no one ever dreamed of being offended at what Pink said. Those who had not heard had the news passed on to them in various forms. Wooden Shoes, who had been loitering in the rear helping the drag-men round up strays, galloped forward to meet his boss.

Eagle Creek Smith urged his horse up the last steep incline right in the face of the leaders, which halted and tried to turn back. Pink, swearing in a whisper at the owner's stupidity, began to force them forward.

"Let 'em alone," Eagle Creek bellowed harshly. "They ain't goin' no farther."

"W-what?" Pink stopped short and eyed him critically. Eagle Creek could not truthfully be called a teetotaler; but Pink had never known him to get worse than a bit wobbly on his legs and his mind had never fogged perceptibly. Still, something was wrong with him, that was certain. Pink glanced dubiously across at the Silent One and saw him shrug his shoulders expressively.

Eagle Creek rode up and stopped within ten feet of the line-backed cow. She seemed hurt at being held up in this manner, Pink thought.

"You'll have to turn this herd back," Eagle Creek announced in harsh tones.

"Why?" Pink yelled rebelliously.

" 'Cause there ain't any room here, so they say. The critters aren't welcome."

"But, gosh-a'mighty, Eagle Creek, what do you mean? It was all arranged for these cows to pasture here. You got to explain things."

"There ain't much explainin' I can do, son," replied Eagle Creek disconsolately. "I made the arrangements indirectly, and all I know now is what I'm told." He seemed to be scanning the far horizon for something or someone he could not see. "Where's Wooden Shoes?"

For answer, the foreman's hat-crown appeared over the ridge as Wooden Shoes himself rode up to join them.

"Well, we're sure up against it," snarled Eagle Creek. "What kind of plans were these that you made for me?"

"What's the matter?" inquired Wooden Shoes, quickly apprehensive.

"Plenty's the matter exclaimed Eagle Creek. "That agent—or the fellow he had workin' for him—reported his renting us pasture. Made the report read about twice as many as we're puttin' on. He's got orders now to turn out every hoof but what belongs there. Claims herd after herd of cattle is runnin' on to the place since this drought came on, when he hasn't got enough water and pasture for his own cows. Couldn't you get some hint of this situation when you made plans for me, Wooden Shoes?"

"My gosh!" Wooden Shoes gasped. Then he looked back at the long string of cattle and bethought him of the castastrophe which faced the Cross L.

"Where'd you hear about this idea of pasturin' our cattle at Belknap, anyway?" Pink demanded of Wooden Shoes as the dust of still another horse's hoofs stirred beside them. Rowdy Vaughan had left his place in the line and ridden forward to see what was holding the herd back.

"It came to me when I was over at Chinook a couple of weeks ago, talkin' to some boys over there. They mentioned how much better the pasture-land was out Belknap way."

VAUGHAN, having heard the dismal story of the delay, turned swiftly to the foreman of the Cross L.

"What boys was it?" he asked quietly. "Who advised you to recommend Belknap? Where did they work?"

"Just some fellas in the saloon in Chinook," Wooden Shoes replied sheepishly.

Vaughan snorted impatiently. "Wooden Shoes," he said, "you and I've worked together on ranches all over this section of the West. Don't start keepin' secrets from me now!"

Eagle Creek pushed forward the attack. "This young fella's right, Wooden Shoes. What coyotes advised you to have me make this deal? What ranch did they come from? Nobody's blamin' you for anything. But we've got to know."

Wooden Shoes gave in weakly. "It was a Canuck who had traveled down from Calgary, was who it was. Said he had

reason to know, for he'd gone through the whole countryside on both sides of the line. It was through him I made the deal that you went workin' on, Eagle Creek."

"His *name*, man!" Eagle Creek prodded.

Wooden Shoes groped desperately for the memory. "Seems like it was Willis or Willets—no, it weren't neither." He looked up with almost childish triumph. "*Wilkes* was his name!"

"Sam Wilkes!" Vaughan exclaimed, watching carefully Wooden Shoes' expression and deciding to his own satisfaction that not guile but only weakness was there.

"One of the worst skunks in all the Northwest!" exclaimed Pink. "He's in the Conroy gang."

"And where was he working—this Sam Wilkes?" asked the Silent One. "What was he doing down this way from Canada?"

"He said he was stayin'," Wooden Shoes continued, "at the Mahoney ranch—up beyond Chinook."

"It certainly looks," replied the Silent One, "as though the threads of destiny were tightening around a bigger and bigger group of people covering miles and miles of territory."

"We got no time for that high-flown talk!" stated Pink angrily. "It's clear we're tangled up with one of the nastiest crowd of crooked dealers in this whole blamed country, and it ain't any time to blabber Shakespeare."

"Pink!" Vaughan protested. "Jim's words may sound highfalutin'. But what he says makes sense that has to be reckoned with. And that's more than can be said for the rest of us. Don't judge everything that a man does by the language that he's learned in school!"

The Silent One laughed.

"Excuse me," he said. "Where are we going next?"

"Turnin' back—it sort of looks like," said Eagle Creek.

"Turnin' back to where?" said Pink, logically.

"I don't know," said Eagle Creek.

Wooden Shoes looked remorseful. "I didn't mean to get us in a jam, Eagle Creek," he said. "Really, I didn't."

"All you needed to do was to let that outfit know the Cross L was in trouble," Pink growled, "and Conroy and all his gang would let loose on the ranch to spite me and Rowdy."

"Don't matter now, seein' it's done," said Eagle Creek gloomily. "You might as well turn the herd loose right here, an' let 'em go to the devil. I don't know what else to do with 'em."

"Man, if you turn 'em loose here, the first storm that hits 'em, they'll die," Wooden Shoes said excitedly. "There's nothing for 'em. We had to turn 'em into the Rockin' R field last night, to get water and feed. Red Willow's gone dry outside that field. They'll die!"

EAGLE CREEK looked at him dully. For the first time in his life he faced utter ruin. "All right, let 'em die, then!" he said.

"That's what they'll sure do," Wooden Shoes reiterated stubbornly. "If they don't get feed and water now, you won't have any roundup next spring."

Pink turned to look out over the close-huddled backs and the thicket of polished horns, and his eyelids stung. Would all of them die? Several thousand cattle that looked to mankind for protection?

He hoped not. There must be some way out.

Down the hill, he knew the other cowboys were making cigarettes while they waited and wondered mightily what it was all about.

"How about the Peck reservation?" Vaughan asked. "Couldn't you get the herd on there?"

"Not a hoof!" growled Eagle Creek, with his chin sunk against his chest. "There's thirty thousand Valley County cattle on the Peck grass now." He looked down at the catttle, as Pink had done and groaned. "I's bad enough to go broke but to think of those poor brutes dyin' off in bunches, for want of grass and water! I've run that brand for over thirty year."

CHAPTER XI

Vaughan Promoted

FACE grim, Vaughan rode closer. "If you don't mind paying duty," he began tentatively, "I can suggest a range over the line, where I'll guarantee feed and water the year around for every hoof you own."

Eagle Creek lifted his head and looked at him. "Whereabouts?" he demanded skeptically.

"Up in the Red Deer country. Pink knows the place. There's range a-plenty, and creeks running through that never go dry. And the country isn't stocked and fenced to death, like this is."

"And would we be ordered off as soon as we got there?"

"Sure not—if you paid duty, which would only be about double what you were going to pay for one year's pasture."

Eagle Creek breathed deeply, like a man who has narrowly escaped suffocation. He had to make a quick decision, and he made it.

"Young man, I believe you're a square dealer, and that you savvy the cow business. I've thought it ever since you first started to work." His keen old eyes twinkled at the memory of Rowdy Vaughan's arrival, and Vaughan grinned. "I take you at your word, and you can consider yourself in charge of this herd as it stands. Take it to that cow heaven you tell about, and you won't be none the worst for it!"

"We'll pass that up," said Vaughan quietly. "I'll take this herd through, though; and I'd advise you to get the rest of the Cross L on the road as soon as they can be gathered. It's a three-hundred-mile drive."

"All right, from now on it's up to you," Eagle Creek told him briskly. "Take 'em back to the Rockin' R field, and I'll send the wagons back to you. Old Mullen will likely make a roar—but that's most all government land he's got fenced, so I guess I can calm him down. Will you go near the ranch?"

"I think so," said Vaughan. "It will be the shortest way."

"Well, I'll give you some blank checks, and you can load up with grub and anything else you need. I'll be over there by the time you are, and fix up that duty business. Wooden Shoes will have to get another outfit together, and get the rest of the bunch on the trail. He won't have any trouble followin' your lead."

"That's true," Vaughan said. "And I think the herd will make it all right."

"I'll likely want you to stay up there and keep cases on 'em. Any objections?"

"Sure not!" laughed Vaughan. "Only I'll need Pink and the Silent One to stay with me."

"Keep what men you want. Anything else?"

"I don't think of anything," said Vaughan slowly. "Only I'd like to have a—talk—with Conroy."

Eagle Creek eyed him sharply. "That makes two of you. Old Bill Brown, up home, would like to see him, too. Bill's a perserverin' old cuss who's always askin' questions, mainly about a bunch of horses that was run off three years ago. You brought one of 'em back into the country last spring, you remember?"

If only they wouldn't bring up Chub all the time! Vaughan was practically resigned to an out-and-out struggle with Harry Conroy, sister or no sister! Still, in all his leisure moments, he dreamed of taking Jessie Conroy off to the Red Deer country, and built miles on miles of air castles. Then he would wake up and tell himself savagely that he would bring Harry Conroy to a showdown—somewhere, somehow! Within him this conflict raged. He even told himself that if Jessie Conroy could once grasp the truth, she would be just.

COLD-BLOODED revenge was not a part of Rowdy Vaughan. Despite the unpaid loan, the attempted ambush, and even poor, stolen Chub, he had it in him to think well of Harry Conroy when he thought of him as Jessie's brother.

If only Conroy would change! If only he could bring himself to cut loose from the ties that had started at Horseshoe Bar and were now reaching across the line to the States.

But here was Eagle Creek Smith before him, speaking of Bill Brown's plodding suspicions. How could Bill Brown know? Even now, who could prove anything against Harry Conroy? It would be as easy to prove a case against Vaughan himself, he mused, After all, *he* had ridden in on Chub! How did they know? Vaughan needed to talk to *two* members of the Conroy family.

When Eagle Creek mentioned Chub, Vaughan and Pink exchanged glances, but said nothing. The Silent One maintained his usual discreet silence.

"I guess we're ready to hit the trail," Vaughan said, eager to snap into action and get the herd under way.

Pink nodded. The Silent One indicated assent with his eyes.

"Well, I ain't stoppin' you," Eagle Creek drawled laconically. "So long, and good luck to you!"

He waited while Pink and the Silent One swung the point back down the hill, with Vaughan helping them, quite unmoved by his sudden promotion. When the herd was fairly started on the backward march, Eagle Creek nodded satisfaction while he pried off a corner of plug-tobacco.

"He's all right," he asserted emphatically. "That boy suits me, from the ground up. If he don't put that deal through in good shape, it'll be because it can't be did."

Wooden Shoes, with whom Vaughan had always been a prime favorite, agreed with Dutch heartiness. Then, leaving the herd to its new guardian, they rode swiftly to overtake and turn back the wagons.

"Three hundred miles! And part of it across a howling desert!" Vaughan drew his brows together. "It's a big thing for me all right, Pink, but it's sure a big contract to take this herd through, if anybody should happen to ask you."

"Oh, buck up! You'll make good, all right—if only these creeks wasn't so bone dry!"

"Well, there's water enough in the Rockin R field for today. We'll throw 'em in there till tomorrow. And I've a notion I can find a better trail across to North Fork than the way we came. I'm going to strike out this afternoon and see, anyway, if Quitter Creek hasn't got water farther up. Once we get north of the home ranch, I can see my way clear."

"Go to it, boss," Pink cried heartily. "I don't see how I'm goin' to keep from sassing you once in a while, though. That's what bothers me. What'll happen if I turn loose on you some time?"

"You'll get fired, I expect." Vaughan laughed and rode off to announce the new change of plans to the rest of the outfit, who were very unhappy in their mystification.

If their reception of the change of plans and foreman was a bit profane, and their manner toward him a bit familiar, Vaughan didn't mind. He knew that they did not grudge him his good luck, even while they hated the long drive. He also knew that they watched him furtively, for nothing—not even misfortune—is so sure a test of a man's character as success. They liked Vaughan, and they did not believe this would spoil him. Still, every man of them was secretly a bit anxious.

ON the trail, he rode in his accustomed place, and, so far as appearances went, the party had no foreman. He went forward and helped Pink take down the fence that had been so carefully put up a few hours before. Then he whistled while he put it in place again, just as if he had no responsibility in the world. The cattle were left to themselves, and the men rode down to their old camp-ground, marked by empty tin-cans and a trodden place where had been the horse corral.

Vaughan swung down and faced the men gravely. Instinctively they stood at attention, waiting for what he had to say. They felt that the situation was so far out of the ordinary that a few re-

marks pertaining to their new relations would not be out of place.

He looked them over appraisingly, and met glances as grave as his own. Straight, capable fellows they were, every man of them.

"Boys," he began impressively, "you all know that from today on you're working under my orders. I never was boss of anything but the cayuse I happen to have under me, and I'm going to extract all the honey there is in the situation. Maybe I'll never be boss again—but at present I'm it. I want you fellows to remember that important fact, and treat me with proper respect. From now on you can call me Mr. Vaughan; 'Rowdy' doesn't go, except on a legal holiday.

"Furthermore, I'm not going to get out at daylight and catch up my own horse. I'll let you take turns being flunky, and I'll expect you to saddle my horse every morning and noon, and bring him to the cook-tent—and hold my stirrup for me. Also, you are expected, at all times and places, to remember you're just common, ordinary, forty-dollar cow-punchers. If I treat you white, it's because I pity you for not being up where I am. Remember, slaves, that I'm your superior, mentally, morally, socially!"

"Chap him!" yelled Pink, and made for him. "I'll stand for a lot, but don't you ever think I'm a slave!"

"Mutiny is strictly prohibited!" Vaughan thundered. "Villains, beware! Come on—er—let's have a swim before the wagons come!"

They laughed and made for the creek, feeling rather at ease over the new foreman's attitude although a bit puzzled.

"If I had an outfit like this to run, and a three-hundred-mile drive to make," Bob Nevin remarked to the Silent One, "blessed if I'd make a josh of it! I'd cultivate the corrugated brow and the stiff spine—me!"

"My friend," the Silent One responded, "don't be too hasty in your judgment. It's because the corrugated brow will come later that he laughs now. You'll presently find yourself accomplishing the impossible in obedience to the flicker of Rowdy Vaughan's eyelids. Man, did you never observe the set of his head, and the look of his eye? Rowdy Vaughan will get more out of this crowd than any man ever did. And if he fails, he'll fail with the band playing 'Hot Time.'"

"Maybe so," Bob admitted, not quite convinced; "but I wonder if he realizes what he's up against."

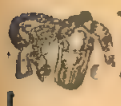
At which the Silent One only smiled queerly as he splashed into the water.

After dinner Vaughan caught up the blue roan, which was his favorite for a hard ride—he seemed to have forgotten his speech concerning "slaves"—and rode away up the coulee which had brought them into the field the night before. The boys watched him go, speculated a lot, and went to sleep as the best way of putting in the afternoon.

Pink, who knew quite well what was in Vaughan's mind, said nothing at all. It is possible that he was several degrees more jealous of the dignity of Vaughan's position than was Vaughan himself, who had no time to think of anything but the best way of getting the herd to Canada. He would like to have gone along, only that Vaughan did not ask him to. Pink assured himself that it was best for Vaughan not to start playing favorites, and curled down in the bed-tent with the others and went to sleep.

It was late that night when Vaughan crept silently into his corner of the tent; but Pink was awake, and whispered to know if he found water. Vaughan's "Yes" was a mere breath, but it was enough.

At sunrise the herd trailed up the Rocking R coulee, and Pink and the Silent One pointed them north of the old trail.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CHAPTER XII

Evil Rumors

EAGLE CREEK SMITH watched his herd move off at last to northward, then sighed with the first relief he had felt in days. It was only a temporary respite, however, before turning back for the ride to the Cross L and the business of starting off the other herd. He had traveled but a few miles when he espied a cloud of dust rising in the distant east. As he rode, the dust-cloud disappeared beyond a rim of rocky hill. Later, as he rounded a curve in the trail, it appeared again.

Now he saw that it was another herd —cattle, cattle endlessly pushing onward, but far away, across the long chasms, a gray, moving mass, slowly lumbering along. More herds were on the trail.

Only after hours of riding did he finally encounter drivers of the herd face to face. They were men he had never seen—from Lone Pine. The riders on point who told him this seemed in no mood to go on with the journey. One rider hung back for the time it took to roll a cigarette, complaining the while. The earth was dry, and they were in search of water and grass for their cows, even as Eagle Creek had been. In a burst of neighborliness, the old rancher told of his own latest plan for escaping the drought-stricken country.

"We're all ridin' the same horse," he replied cheerfully to the other's thanks at sharing the information. "These are days when the cattle dry up and blow away like dust. Look at that old washboard there, now, will you?"

He pointed to the protruding ribs of one old cow which seemed to have about all she could do to lift one foot ahead of another.

Thus Eagle Creek Smith found it all the way back to the Cross L. The herds of the entire area were afoot, seeking fairer lands, and finding only disappointment and starvation!

Back home, the talk was all on one subject, and it was loudest in the Elkhorn saloon.

"What did you do with the herd you took out from here?" Bill Brown asked him.

"I suppose you found green pastures and rivers of water," Rodway commented mockingly.

Eagle Creek grinned wryly and took the banter. From his manner, no one could tell whether he had lost every last cow that he had started on the trail and was mourning his loss in secret, or had led his herd into some cattle paradise and was holding out on the others lest they might poach on his happy preserve. For his own part, Eagle Creek hoped that his cows were approaching fairer lands, although he scarcely dared to admit his own hopefulness. Yet he trusted Vaughan to win the day if any man in the country could do so.

"Well," he said and grinned at Rodway and Brown. "I did have it in mind to let you in on a little secret. But since you got yourselves so almighty wiseacred, I think I'll hold onto it for a spell."

Rodway started. Bill Brown stopped his drink in mid-air, ignoring the drops that spilled over onto his vest.

"You *did* find somethin'," he burst out.

Eagle Creek held up a restraining hand. "Now, now, fellers. Remember I'm just a galoot who has gambled."

Rodway edged closer. "Don't take it out on us," he urged hopefully. "If there is such a place, tell us where!"

Eagle Creek chuckled. "It's just a hope, boys," he said softly, "but I think enough of it to pin my whole fortune on its tail. If you want to ride along, you can follow my trail when I pull out in the mornin' and maybe save your herds. If you don't, you can stay here where destruction's more certain. Either way you can lose. But if you come along, at least you'll go down tryin'."

Rodway and Brown exchanged glances. "But how can we be sure your hunch is the right one?" Bill Brown

asked. "There's herds on the move all over the county, and nobody's sent out word of a strike yet."

"Right," Eagle Creek agreed. "But you're forgettin' that I was one of the first ones to move. I've combed the country for forty miles around and kicked the dust out of every waterhole from here to Tophet. This time I think I've hit it. If the cows don't drop by the way, I believe they'll find grass and water at the end of the trails just as sure as—"

"Just as sure as Rowdy Vaughan's *your* prophet!" Rodway interposed quickly.

IT WAS Eagle Creek's turn to start. Gently Bill Brown nudged Rodway aside and faced up to the Cross L boss.

"Pay no attention to Rodway," he said. "It's a little joke of his. I reckon we're both a little on the prod right now. You see, you're the second one today that's come bearin' 'good tidings.' "

"What do you mean?"

The shadow of a smile crossed Brown's lips. "There's been a little cattleman's meeting—in there." He nodded toward a door under the balcony that ringed the dancehall. "Rodway and I were invited. Some high-ranchin' mucky-muck of an efficiency expert was tellin' us where we should take our herds."

Rodway shot a questioning glance at the bartender. The man nodded. "Meetin's still goin' on," he said.

Rodway turned to Eagle Creek. "Come on," he said, moving across the room.

Bill Brown detached himself from the bar. Reluctantly, Eagle Creek Smith followed, puzzling vainly over this new development and its implied connection with Rowdy Vaughan.

The door that opened under Rodway's hand gave onto a room that was normally used for private gambling parties. Perhaps fifteen feet on a side, it offered ample accommodation for the dozen or so men who were gathered there. At one end was an oblong table, and beyond that another door that led to the alley at the back of the saloon.

Behind the table stood a man whom Eagle Creek had never seen before.

The stranger was dark-haired, smooth-shaven and square-jawed. Although every whit of fifty, he displayed the vigor of a man who could hit the saddle for an eight-hour stretch every day in the year. His dark town clothes indicated affluence. A single diamond on his left little finger and the gold chain across his expanse of vest gave hint of his tastes. He had been speaking when the door opened. Now he twirled the gold chain absently as Bill Brown picked a way to the table.

Brown gestured with his hand. "This is Eagle Creek Smith," he said. "Eagle Creek, meet Bob Mahoney."

In times past Eagle Creek Smith had caught some muttered words from Pink and the Silent One. Now he eyed the subject of those words curiously, and found himself discounting the words. To all intents and purposes, Bob Mahoney was a respectable citizen. A fellow cattleman and, as such, bound up in the common cause which had brought these men to a meeting. Perhaps the one incongruous facet to his appearance was the slightly patronizing smile which curled the edges of his thin lips. His smile was out of place in a company where the least hint of cheerfulness had long ago been dried up by the searing tragedy of parched earth and cloudless skies.

He turned that smile on his audience. "Meeting's over, men," he said simply.

One of the ranchers stood up abruptly. "So far as I'm concerned," he snapped, "this meetin' was over ten minutes ago."

A second voice broke in. "Tod Sloan speaks for me, too, Mahoney!"

"Me, too!"

"Same here!"

Men were rising and making for the door. With his hand on the knob, the rancher called Tod Sloan turned for a parting remark.

"Next time you send out word, Mahoney, you can save us all a lot of time by givin' your riders the *full* message!"

He slammed the door behind him.

In seconds the room had emptied itself of its occupants until only Rodway, Eagle Creek, and Bill Brown stood facing the speaker across the table. Rodway eased himself into a chair.

"Tell Eagle Creek," he invited, "what you've been tellin' the rest of us."

WITH a slow deliberation Mahoney drew a cigar from his vest pocket. He clipped the end with a small silver knife, struck a match, and turned toward the window, hands thrust comfortably under his coattails.

"I've been telling them," he began, "what they should have been glad to hear. The land's dried up; the streams are sun-baked coulees; the grass is gone for another year. Without relief, every head of beef in the whole country is doomed to slow death. I aimed to give them that relief—by offering to buy up their cattle."

"What'll you pay?" Eagle Creek barked.

Mahoney turned from the window. He exhaled a cloud of blue smoke, the shadow of a now-familiar smile parting his lips.

"A dollar a head," he said softly.

"Ridiculous!" Rodway snapped.

"Why so?" Mahoney answered calmly. "The way things are, you all stand to lose every penny. My offer gives you a stake for another season. As my fellow ranchers, I want to see you succeed. It's good for the country."

Eagle Creek nodded sagely. "And just what would you be doin' with twenty thousand culls that's so wore out they won't make decent shortenin' or shoeleather?"

"A good question," Mahoney said with a chuckle. "I can see you're a business man. So am I. If you sell now, I can start the herds to my range up Chinook way. There's grazing and water there that'll put them on their feet by roundup this fall."

"Look," Eagle Creek Smith pursued. "You've been tellin' about relief. You can show yourself to be right neighborly just by leasin' us some of them fine grazin' lands you mention."

"I'm willing to." Mahoney nodded, surveying the end of his cigar and holding a match to the dead ash. "At two dollars a head."

Bill Brown drew a sharp breath. "Even after hearin' it a second time, I don't believe it."

"It's extortion!" Rodway exclaimed bitterly.

Eagle Creek's eyes were grim. "I've got a better offer than that," he declared. "Brown—Rodway—if you'd like to take your chances with me, or know of anybody else who's willin', you can pick me up on the trail at sundown tomorrow!"

For the first time, the look of calm disinterest disappeared from Mahoney's eyes. "What trail would that be?"

"I'd rather not say," Eagle Creek retorted sharply. He started for the door.

"One minute!" It was the most enthusiastic remark Mahoney had made all afternoon. He smiled broadly now as the three ranchmen turned to hear him.

"I haven't told you everything yet," he continued. "If you've decided to move your herds, there's one last piece of advice I can offer. "You see, I do really mean to help."

"I can see that," Eagle Creek put in in ironical tones.

"I'm glad you do," Mahoney said and smiled, "because there's something going on right under your nose that's going to bear watching."

"What's that?"

Mahoney ignored the question. "One member of an outfit belonging to one of you gentlemen," he went on, "has caused trouble in the past by his horse stealing tendencies. Now as I see it, a horse is only one step removed from a cow. With all these cattle going on the move, his temptation is going to be great."

"Get to the point!" Eagle Creek snapped.

Mahoney nodded. "I don't mind saying, Mr. Smith, that there's a man in your employ that every one of us here has got to keep an eye on. He's a rascal with a thieving past. His name is Rowdy Vaughan."

"That's a lie!" spat Eagle Creek Smith heatedly, squaring off for trouble.

"I knew you'd defend him," Mahoney continued, smoothly and without umbrage, "but let him stay with your herds and see what happens. The herds will one day disappear—the ones that don't die of drought. And Mr. Rowdy Vaughan will disappear with them, if I don't make him disappear first!"

A FAINT smile curled Bill Brown's lips.

Rodway shifted uneasily. "It's true he came into this country with my Chub," he reflected.

"Your *what?*" Mahoney echoed.

"Chub is a pack-horse of mine," Rodway explained. "He vanished into thin air along with a lot of others from these parts three years ago. Vaughan came ridin' in with him during a blizzard."

"And there you are!" finished Mahoney. "Figure it out!"

"We've been doin' a little figurin'," said Bill Brown in a quiet way, "but we don't quite make it come out the same knothole."

Mahoney shrugged condescendingly. "Naturally, you don't want to believe anything against your own men. But you've got to look at facts."

"We've looked at a few," Eagle Creek interjected. "One thing that concerns me, Mr. Mahoney, is why you should come all the way down here from Chinook to give us advice when you got your own problems at home to deal with."

Mahoney spread out his hands in a yielding gesture. "We're all in this business together. What affects you affects me."

"We appreciate your thinkin' of us," Eagle Creek said shortly. His hands reached for the doorknob. "Meetin's over," he declared with finality.

Bill Brown caught up with him in the bar. "So you've got a bad man in your outfit?" he asked, watching Smith's expression.

"I guess I have, if I listen to him," Eagle Creek answered, jerking his head toward the door.

"You ain't listenin' too close, eh?"

"If I got any judgment left in my thick head," said Eagle Creek, "I can't help thinkin' that, as far as bad men go, I've seen plenty worse than Rowdy Vaughan."

"Why don't you call him in and we'll have a talk with him?" asked Rodway.

"Right now I couldn't get at him if I wanted to," Eagle Creek admitted. "That's why this Mahoney fella kind of worries me."

In the room they had just left, Mr. Robert Mahoney permitted himself the luxury of an unworried chuckle. Once again he re-lit his dying cigar, then moved to the door leading onto the back street. He opened it. A figure had been waiting behind that door. Now, at Mahoney's invitation, the man slipped into the room. In the shadows under the Stetson the dim light revealed the unhandsome features of one Ben Tucker, lately of the Horseshoe Bar in Calgary.

Mahoney chuckled again. "They've decided to move the herds, Ben," he said. "You can head out and tell the boys it's Plan Number two."

"Plan Number Two!" Tucker echoed eagerly. "Gee, boss, you don't miss a trick, do you?"

"Not a trick, Ben," Mahoney agreed benevolently, as he bestowed a cloud of cigar smoke on the simple, smiling face of the appreciative Mr. Tucker.

CHAPTER XIII

Slanderous Rumors

ONCE again, for those hungry herds, it was the same story as for the previous drive of the Cross L outfit. Long, sluggish plodding, with every day a few animals falling by the wayside; hot, dusty days and dust-covered men and horses and cattle, nights of sleep from sheer exhaustion at camps improvised as opportunity of-

fered. And always the never-ceasing search for water.

Finally, by arrangement, Eagle Creek Smith came up with Wooden Shoes Mielke, who had ridden back to meet him from the second herd. Wooden Shoes surveyed the long line of scrawny gray-brown cattle and sighed because he knew the responsibility involved.

"It's a long drag," he replied to Eagle Creek's request for news, "and we've lost a few. But I guess we're coming on to better days. The land was already growin' greener when I turned back to meet you. And we hadn't come near the border yet. You can read the signs of the earth."

"How's your new *segundo* doin'?" asked Eagle Creek.

"Seems to be all right," Wooden Shoes nodded. "He's young and has got lots of steam. Takes a lot of responsibility. But he sure gets the work out of those fellas."

"What would you say, Wooden Shoes," Eagle Creek asked him bluntly, "if I was to tell you that Rowdy Vaughan has been accused of horse-rustlin'? I was warned we'd better watch our step or he might make off with a herd of cattle, too? The whole dang herd!" Smith's eyes twinkled.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Wooden Shoes. "I'd say you sure ought to watch out in that case." Then, after a moment's reflection: "I've known Rowdy a long time, seen him on different ranches. You know I was responsible for him comin' to the Cross L. But I can't forget that he rode in with Rodway's Chub as his pack-horse."

Eagle Creek shook his head. "Wooden Shoes," he complained wearily, "first you advise me to get my horses on the move—then I find the advice is bad. Next, we're kicked off the land you've told me was already rented. You agreed that it was right to put Rowdy Vaughan in charge of a herd of cattle, but after you hear Rowdy Vaughan may not be trustworthy, you remember all about Chub! Wooden Shoes, all I ask is—ain't you got *any* thoughts of your own?"

"I'm sorry," the foreman apologized.

"Don't be sorry!" Eagle Creek cursed humorously. "Get some brains in that haywire head of yours! That's all I ask!"

But Wooden Shoes could not insert brains where the crevices and crannies for brain supply were all filled up. Nor could he change a trend of character that made him shilly-shally from one idea—from one friend—to another. "I'm sorry" was his watchword; and if he wasn't sorry for one blunder, he was for another.

Even as Eagle Creek ironically railed at him and followed Vaughan on to the north with the second herd of bedraggled cattle, Rowdy Vaughan continued to push his way on toward the Canadian border.

A bird's-eye view of that Montana cattle country would have revealed strange conformations of herds on the move; Rowdy Vaughan's four thousand head up toward the international boundary-line. Behind them came the rest of Eagle Creek Smith's outfit. From the same direction, herds belonging to Bill Brown and Rodway and other ranchmen, all hitting the trail—all making for grass and water to save their staggering stock.

But it was not possible for anyone to get an over-all view of the pattern that those moving herds were forming in the hope of water. Least of all did Rowdy Vaughan conceive that such a pattern was taking shape. He knew only of his own responsibility to get the first four thousand of Eagle Creek's cattle to the Red Deer country that he loved. After that he would get the rest of Eagle Creek's herd across the border.

LATER, if the plan worked, it might be that he could bring Jessie Conray to this northern country to live. He was so musing when one of his boys rode forward from somewhere at the rear of the line of cattle.

"New herd's appearing!" exclaimed the excited boy.

"Must be Wooden Shoes," said Vaughan. "I'll ride back with you and look."

As he rode past Pink and the Silent

One, he conveyed the news, and excitement spread along the line. They waited until the second herd had caught up with them.

Eagle Creek himself rode forward to greet Vaughan.

"We made it!" he said, looking around to take in the brighter view ahead. "Didn't lose many either. How much farther you got to go?"

"I figure about another hundred miles," Vaughan answered. "There's nothing to worry about from here on. We had a camp with water last night. Only we've got to push on to get grazing land where nobody will bother us."

"It's all right," said Eagle Creek. "You push right ahead to that Canuck heaven of yours, with Pink and the Silent One to help you. You can use Wooden Shoes, too. But he's too wobbly-minded to take charge of anything much. He heard a strange yarn about you."

Vaughan involuntarily turned with a start. He had never heard Eagle Creek speak in such a strange tone. A questioning look came into the young man's eyes. He fixed them on the old rancher, who turned and pretended to examine the drag of the moving herd, until the last cows had gone through along the trail. Silently Vaughan joined him, waiting for the break.

Eagle Creek rubbed dry fingers across his lips, as though seeking to feel the words that would not come.

"I didn't put much stock in those stories," he said self-consciously. "Somebody's spreadin' bad tales about you back home at the Rodway Ranch. He stopped to clear his throat. "It has to do with that pack-horse Chub that you brought down with you from Canada. You've been called a name. I won't repeat what the name was."

As Smith spoke, Vaughan's own eyes had narrowed perceptibly. Now a thin white line rimmed the edges of his grimly set lips.

"I'll say the name for you," he drawled coolly. "The word is 'rustler.' You needn't fear to use it. And now you can tell me somethin'. Who called me that name?"

Eagle Creek fumbled clumsily for his bandanna and he spoke haltingly:

"He was a fella named Mahoney."

Twenty minutes later, Eagle Creek was on his way back to the home ranch, satisfied to let affairs remain as they were. Rowdy Vaughan in a minimum of time was uneasily conveying the news of his damaged reputation to Pink and the Silent One.

"I've got six thousand cattle in my charge now," Vaughan concluded. "It's a nice time to learn I'm a rustler!" He looked at Pink. "Maybe I'll lift a couple of hundred head tonight. What do you say, Pink?" He spoke humorously, trying to conceal the wild rage that burned within him.

"I bet Harry Conroy's behind it all!" snarled Pink. "Now are you ready to forget and forgive and let bygones be bygones for the sake of a sweet little school teacher?"

"Pink," said Vaughan softly, "you promised to keep your mouth shut on that subject. The promise still holds. Keep it shut."

"In some ways, Rowdy," Pink answered, "you are the dumbest cowhand I ever met, even if you are my boss. Or did Wooden Shoes pass over his brains, too, when you took his job?"

As usual, Vaughan did not get angry with Pink. Nor did he try to make answer. Instead, he found himself watching the Silent One, who slowly lighted his pipe. On his face was that same mildly serious look in which Pink and Vaughan had learned to read deep meaning. His head turned slowly, and the words came.

"You have heard of a fella named Mahoney," he said to Rowdy Vaughan. "I don't know much about this Conroy, but I'm telling you that your biggest trouble is going to be with Bob Mahoney!"

PINK laughed scornfully. "You're off your base, Jim. How about Sam Wilkes, Ben Tucker, Hoss Wallaby, Luke Bridger, and all those others? Rowdy and me knew them on the Canadian side. They're worse than Harry Conroy."

"Yeah," agreed the Silent One without rancor. "And how do you know they aren't working for Mahoney?"

Rowdy Vaughan had a deep respect for the Silent One's wisdom, but in this case he believed he had erred in his conclusions. Much as it had rankled to learn of Bob Mahoney's presence on the Rodway Ranch from Eagle Creek, secretly he blamed Harry Conroy as the instigator of his troubles. For him bitter memories stretched from that first meeting in Calgary, where Conroy had stretched him in the dust with an injured ankle, down to the present time. He saw clearly he had a score to settle with Conroy—and nothing short of open warfare would make matters right.

Thereupon he spoke his mind frankly to Pink and the Silent One, with proper emphasis to make himself clear upon the subject.

Pink was savagely delighted. "That's the talk!" he cried. "Now you got gumption. If I was you, I'd buckle on my gun, hunt him up, and bust him where he looks biggest!"

The Silent One, however, grew ironical. "That's right," he observed sarcastically. "While you gentlemen have your eyes glued on the shiny article being dangled in front of you, the sleight-of-hand artist, Mahoney, is doing his tricks." He lifted a warning finger. "Be careful—if you don't want him to walk circles around you and your herds. Watch Mahoney, not Conroy!"

"Sure, I know," Pink said. "Mahoney's your pet peeve. Conroy's ours."

The Silent One went on stubbornly. "Harry Conroy is putty in the hands of a master sculptor, who can shape the putty any way he pleases with scarcely no effort. Just wait!"

"What's that over the hill, up ahead there?" Vaughan interrupted him, pointing along the trail. "Why would they be comin' this way?"

"Maybe we're overtakin' 'em," Pink ventured.

Vaughan laughed shortly. "With this bunch of lame hulls? Besides, the dust doesn't hang right. They're comin' this way."

He hailed a passing rider. "Benson, ride scout to that cloud of dust yonder and ask the point where he's takin' that herd. Then shoot right back here." He turned a worried look on Pink and the Silent One. "Hope nothing is wrong at the border!"

Pink's eyes widened in wonder, and a low whistle escaped his dry lips.

The cows had had water and some grazing at their improvised cow camp of the night before, and the men were for that reason in better spirits.

It was getting toward the end of day when a fresh rise in the ground brought them suddenly onto a miniature lake—nature's invitation to stop and build a camp. While the sky reddened until it was all so bright that colors were scarcely discernible on the earth below, the men in Vaughan's train paused now and then in the midst of their work to scan the distant herd.

The odor of boiling coffee pleasantly reached the men's nostrils as the chuck-wagon cooks began setting out food. After the horses and cattle had satisfied themselves from the lake and started grazing on grass at the rim of the woods—all under careful surveillance—the men took turns at filling their stomachs, sitting on fallen logs or hunkering down on their heels by the fires.

"Tastes good to me," said Pink. "But, my, what I wouldn't give for a regular old Mulligan stew like Hambones used to fix up at the Cross L!"

VAUGHAN toyed with his food, now and again raising his eyes to the hills silhouetted to northward. "Benson should have been back by now," he explained to the Silent One's unspoken question.

When the meal was over, he called the roll for nighthawk duty. He held his own name out for the dog watch. Despite Pink's urging that he get some sleep, he felt that tonight of all nights he must sacrifice rest for the sake of the dim suspicion that Benson's absence had instilled. Besides, responsibility itself provided the necessary stimulus to keep him awake.

Shortly after the camp had bedded down, he saddled a fresh horse and started a quiet tour of the rounds.

The field on the north side of the lake afforded a bedground for the cattle. The ground sloping sharply to the north and the thickly timbered wood to the west created a kind of box canyon that cradled men and animals. At the wooded end, Vaughan stopped to speak to the two men who had haltered their horses there. Despite their assurances that all was well, he could not down the tension that gripped him. Benson had still not been heard from.

With methodical thoroughness, he picked his way down toward the edge of the lake. There was no moon, and he let the horse have its head, trusting to the animal's judgment to make its own way in the darkness. Skirting some massive boulders that raised their dim silhouettes on the shale hillside at the edge of the lake, Vaughan reflected on his own caution. If he had anything to fear, it would come from the other end of the lake, where the open plain gave exit for the cattle, and entrance for anyone that might come in search of them. And then he changed his mind.

It was a sound that had disturbed him, nothing more. He had heard it a thousand times before without giving it any special significance. A coyote's howl—common enough on the prairies. Prairies—yet this one had sounded in the woods! He pulled up his horse and listened.

A low wail came to him down the shallow hillside.

"Hey, boss!"

Vaughan strained to see through the impenetrable blackness. "Benson?" he called, hopefully.

"Yeah, boss." The sound came faintly on the night air.

Vaughan felt a sudden inexplicable irritation with the man. "I'm here, Benson," he called sharply. "Come down."

The voice came plaintively. "Can't. I'm hurt, boss."

And then it came to Vaughan. That almost idiotic repetition of the word 'bos'—the howling of the coyote in the woods! Quickly, he put the two together.

"My horse has picked up a stone," he called. "I'll be there in a minute."

He dismounted hurriedly, dropping the reins in a ground hitch. A momentary check of his bearings, and he was off up the hillside, as silently as the terrain would permit him to go.

He climbed steadily for a hundred feet, hesitated, and went ahead another fifty feet to make sure. Then he turned sharply to the left, making his way across the face of the hillside. A few yards along this tangent and he stopped again, looking down over the lake. Not a dozen yards away was the thing he had expected. An ambush!

STANDING out from the hillside, their black silhouettes looming up against the star-studded surface of the lake, three figures on horseback awaited Vaughan's coming. Silently, he slipped the six-gun from his holster. He stood up.

"Benson!" he called softly.

One of the horsemen whirled swiftly.

"It's Vaughan!" he shouted.

Vaughan threw himself to the ground, watching the orange flame burst from the rider's middle. It was what he had been waiting for. His own gun answered, and the dark shadow before him seemed to break in half. A horse reared as the remaining two figures scuttled for cover.

"Over here, Vaughan," came Benson's shouted encouragement. Vaughan rose, aimed, and hesitated. Changing his mind, he half-slid, half-ran down the hillside to his waiting horse.

He urged the animal into a canter, headed for the woods where he had left his men. They greeted him with guns ready.

"It's Benson," he explained, low-toned. "Somebody's got him up on the hill. If he hadn't called me 'boss' I'd have walked into the same ambush. Tod, you ride back to the chuckwagon and bring some help. Williams, cover me while I see what damage has been done. And stay away from the sky-line!"

CHAPTER XIV

Ruthless Massacre

TOD JONES and Williams obeyed with swift understanding. Range warfare was not out of their experience, and most of the punchers in Vaughan's cavvy of hands had at one time or another participated in gunfrays. Already, Tod Sloan was spurring away. Seconds later, Vaughan and Williams were covering the trail to the hillside.

"Any idea who's got Benson?" Williams asked.

Vaughan answered, "I sent him off to find the herd layin' to north of us. That's all I know."

"That makes two herds," Williams answered absently.

"What do you mean, *two?*"

"I was ridin' drag," Williams answered. "Halfway into camp I seen a herd toppin' the rise to the east. They never come on, though. Just stayed there. I sat up on the ridge durin' supper and watched 'em."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Thought you knew," said Williams. "Others saw it besides me. They were closer to you at chow-time. Maybe they figured it wasn't important."

Vaughan interrupted the trend of his own thoughts. "We're here," he said, reining his horse. "Follow me up the hill as far behind as you can without losin' me." He sent his horse up over the loose shale.

In a clearing between three boulders, he dismounted. In the dirt at his feet lay the figure of a dead man. He called to Williams then, knelt and turned the body over, gingerly. He felt for a match, struck it. Over his shoulder came Williams' long whistle.

"It's Frenchy," he said. "In Texas we'd call that one a *malo hombre.*"

At the edge of the woods a gun roared, the slug smacking shale into their faces from a spot two feet away. Vaughan dropped the match and threw himself sideways against Williams. They both went down. Hugging the ground in the shelter of a rock, Vaughan spoke quickly.

"This Frenchy—what would you call him in our neck of the woods?"

Williams spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "Just plain bad medicine. He's been holin' up in a shack near Rodway's for upwards of six months. Then Bill Brown comes along one day askin' a few questions about horses, and next day Frenchy lights out for other parts. Seems he had the wrong answers. Last I heard of him, he was goin' to work for a feller named Mahoney. The Silent One can tell you all about it."

"The Silent One *has*," came the plaintive reminder from the black night behind them.

"Jim!" Vaughan exclaimed involuntarily.

"The same," answered that individual, dropping to the ground in the little circle. "If I could see your face right now, I'd say you were blushing for shame."

Vaughan ignored the thrust. "How come you to develop these quiet, sneaking ways. You didn't fly here."

The Silent One chuckled. "There are times when I take pride in living up to a name." He cocked his head to one side. "I'm not like the tallow-headed youngster who approaches now with the gentle tread of a stampeding bull."

For answer, a shower of shale and rocks let loose on the hillside below, accompanied by the angry tones of someone in distress.

"Pink!" Vaughan laughed. "How did you two manage to get here so fast, Jim?"

"We didn't wait for a messenger," said the Silent One. "We heard pistol shots, and we came. It now remains to be seen if we will conquer as well."

His final word was punctuated by another roar of gunfire from the wood above. It was followed seconds later by another—then still another, farther along the line of trees that rimmed the lake.

A figure detached itself from the darkness surrounding the three cowboys, landing in their midst in a flying dive broken by Williams' prone figure.

"Welcome home, Pink," the Silent One intoned. "The twenty-one gun salute is in your honor."

The enraged Pink cursed luridly. "What're they wastin' all that lead for? There ain't a speck of red showin' from our side yet!"

A LOW rumbling bawl came to them on the breeze.

"The cattle!" Vaughan exclaimed suddenly. "That's what the shootin's about! They're aimin' to chouse those poor nervous skeletons into a stampede!"

"What's the point in that?" Williams demanded. "If this is a rustle, seems to me the fellers behind it would do better to hit those other two herds out in the open. Ours is a lot harder to get at, seems to me."

"The answer," said the Silent One, quietly, "is that those other two herds, as you naively call them, have already been rustled."

The Silent One clucked his tongue softly. "Shall I mention the name again? You've just viewed the corpse of Frenchy. You were decoyed onto the Peck Reservation by Wallaby. Both have indicated a mild hostility toward Eagle Creek's herd. Both are in the employ of Mahoney."

All hands waited on Vaughan's comment. While they waited, a shout from the woods forestalled it.

"Come on out and take your medicine, Vaughan! It'll go down a lot easier now than later!"

The voice was familiar, yet Vaughan failed to identify the owner.

Pink jumped to his feet. "Come down and make us take it!" he yelled back.

For answer, a volley of gunfire roared from the cover above. Williams grunted, and the Silent One exclaimed as the cowpuncher fell against him.

"It's—all right," Williams gasped. "Just—my arm."

"Why don't we *do* something?" Pink demanded in an agony of impatience.

Vaughan nodded, unseen. "Let's get 'em, boys!" he muttered hoarsely.

In the last few seconds, it had suddenly dawned on him how right the Silent One was. This was no stray bandit attack. This was an enemy he had met with before—an enemy that knew him, and every one of his men as well. The evidence of Frenchy, of Hoss Wallaby, of Conroy—and of the man who employed them. The Silent One had said it: this was war—Mahoney-organized war.

It all came clear as day. The game was rustling. It was a game that took full advantage of the drought and the lack of pasturage on the home ranches. It had watched the herds get on the move. Mahoney had encouraged such movement on as wide a country-side scale as could be commanded. With this much accomplished, the organized band could then carry on their marauding activities as centrally as possible when the herds had been led into one area—most of them dreadfully weakened by the long quest for water and grass, with the men tired and disgusted and weakened in spirit.

The herd they had seen across the hills, and the one Williams had seen, were units that had surrendered. Heaven only knew where they had come from. To be sure, in such a vast game men like Conroy and Wallaby and Frenchy could be but small players. The Silent One was right. Mahoney was behind it all! Yet he was well covered. No actual proof of his guilt existed—save suspicion!

"You've got sense in your head now," the Silent One whispered. "All you need is to be in a tough spot."

Vaughan snorted. "What do you think we're in now?"

He personally saw to it that Williams was comfortable. The bullet had pierced the arm cleanly, and a bandage stanched the flow of blood. Pink scrambled down the hillside, returning seconds later with a full canteen. They placed Williams in the protection of a rock, then Pink was despatched to summon more Circle L riders.

Vaughan turned toward where he'd left the Silent One. "Up we go," he said.

But the Silent One had already gone. Vaughan wheeled to face the circle of flashing fire that rimmed the woods.

His first shot brought three answers, but showed him that one orange flash in the line of fire had been successfully extinguished. Above the roar of the guns and the bellowing of the milling cattle he heard a man scream over in the trees, and he knew where the Silent One had gone. He gauged his own movements accordingly, keeping the fire concentrated between himself and his sidekick.

THE noise of tramping, bawling cattle grew louder, and Vaughan strained to force a quick conclusion to the battle. Pocketed as they were in the lake basin, the cows could move in only two directions. If the riders were holding them at the other end, the maddened animals would try to run for the woods. That would leave the Circle L riders in the middle—between a herd of stampeding cattle on one side and Mahoney's guns on the other! Vaughan pressed forward, ears cocked for the sound of the break-through behind him.

The gunfire was concentrated among the rocks, now, where Vaughan and the Silent One had succeeded in bringing the battle to the enemy. Vaughan heard a shout behind him, and hailed the coming of a handful of Circle L men. Ahead, a rosebud of flame blossomed beneath a tree. Seven more flowered in a semicircle around it. Vaughan's own gun spoke.

"Six," he said.

A bullet spanked into a rock beside him. He took aim.

"Five."

Beside him, a heavy body thudded into the dust and a gun exploded almost in his ear. The Silent One was back.

"Four," came the Silent One's jubilant cry. "That's pretty fair odds, Rowdy. Let's move in and introduce ourselves."

"Right!" Vaughan's voice matched the Silent One's jubilation. "Let's go!"

Crouching, he ran swiftly forward a dozen paces, then dropped flat to the earth. The expected bullet passed over his head. He answered it, rising. A curse broke from the trees, and Vaughan stalked it with his gun. And then, in his enthusiasm, he ran head on into a towering sycamore.

Despite the shock and the swelling bump on his head, he felt an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh. He had made it—and just in time. The firing was all behind him now, and he dropped to the ground to avoid being hit by his own men. He leaned against the tree and fed bullets into the empty cylinder of his six-shooter. Then he rose and advanced stealthily a dozen paces into the woods.

He moved unhindered. Here among the trees, the firing of the Cross L men sounded strangely muffled. Far ahead, a crashing in the brush signaled the end of the marauders' aggression.

"Jim!" he called. "We've chased 'em!"

Out in the open, the Silent One was calling on the men to cease firing.

Vaughan advanced to the rim of the woods. On the eastern horizon, the first gray streaks of dawn were beginning to show. The Silent One scrambled up the hill to join him.

"You're not quitting now?" he asked. "Take your lesson from Germanicus. In the year Fifty-six A.D. he pursued the Huns across the Rhine. His mistake was that he stopped there."

Vaughan laughed. "Not quitting, Jim. Just waitin' to pick up reinforcements. I'm not forgettin' those skunks have got Benson. It'll take more than the two of us to get him back."

"Meanwhile," the Silent One answered, "you'll want to know where to start looking for him." He gestured toward the woods. "Do you mind?"

Vaughan sobered. "If you feel you can scout 'em better alone, all right. I'll be along as soon as the camp's organized."

The Silent One nodded. "I'll round up my horse. There'll be plenty of sign for you to follow."

Vaughan held out his hand. The Si-

lent One accepted the handshake. "So long," he said, as Vaughan turned to go down the hill.

Approaching the men on the flat, Vaughan counted faces in the early light of dawning and breathed easier. In the shooting just passed, the Cross L had held at least one advantage. All the gunplay had been directed at disturbing the cattle or eliminating himself and the Silent One. Not a single enemy bullet had found its mark in the camp. Williams was the only casualty, and that not a serious one. The condition of the cattle, however, gave Vaughan a shock.

FOR a hundred yards in a line to the lake's edge, dead cows lay piled in a double row of destruction, their skin-and-bones carcasses presenting a mute sacrifice to the graying heavens. Pink approached silently.

"How come?" Vaughan asked.

Pink shook his head. "Sorry, Rowdy, I had to do it. They had to be stopped some way. It was a question of Mahoney's bullets or bein' trampled to death."

Vaughan nodded. "Let's get some coffee," he said.

The chuckwagon had kept a fire going all night for the benefit of the riders at the end of the lake. With the coming of dawn, the cook's helper had been despatched to the woods with a steaming pot and the beginnings of breakfast. Vaughan waited for a cup all around before calling the men around him.

"Boys," he said, "we've won the first round, but the fight's not over yet. The sidewinders who attacked us last night have got Benson prisoner." He hesitated, gauging the reaction. "Now I know you signed on just to make a drive. There ain't a soul here who ever went out gunning in cold blood. But the fact remains that Benson's one of us and he's missing. The question is—are we goin' to bring him back?"

"There ain't any need in goin', Vaughan! Benson's right here!"

The shout had come from beyond the circle of riders. Heads turned, and Pink's hand clutched Vaughan's arm.

"Look!" he cried. "Benson!"

Vaughan followed his hand, pointing to a bare knoll that stood out from the trees on the slope, not fifty yards away. A figure on horseback was posed there beside a tall sycamore. The figure was indeed Benson. But it had not been Benson's voice that had called, for Benson was gagged and bound and noosed with a rope that hung loosely from the lowest limb of the sycamore!

Vaughan gasped. "Benson!"

For answer, another figure stepped out from behind the distant tree. It was the figure of a stranger, yet he hailed Vaughan familiarly.

"Here's your man, Vaughan! If you want to see him stay alive, quiet your boys down and listen!"

A rumbling surge of shock and indignation broke hoarsely above the little circle on the flat. Vaughan's face drained of color. For the first time in his life he felt true blind rage, a savage urge to kill! Instinctively his fingers went for his gun. Then, through misty eyes he saw the stranger imperiously remove his hat and poise it over the flanks of Benson's horse. Vaughan bit his lip hard. Quickly he held up his hand to the men. His voice trembled as he spoke.

"Hold it, boys. We'll hear what this fella has to say."

On the hillside, the stranger bowed mockingly. "I knew you'd listen to reason," he called. "Now here's my proposition.

"I'm goin' to turn over Benson here—safe, sound, and with nary a scratch on his hide. In exchange, you're goin' to turn over to me those poor, empty skin-bags you've been herdin' to certain starvation. They're bound to die anyway, so I figure I'm kinda doin' you a favor. That's why, in addition, I ask you to take a good look at the long-gun barrels ringin' you from the slopes of the hills."

Swiftly the Cross L men stared about them. It was true. During the dark before dawn, or perhaps in making ready for the stampede which did not come off, the rustling gang had surrounded them on the hillside. They were trapped.

Rowdy Vaughan experienced the greatest chagrin of his life. In fighting to avoid one pitfall, he had fallen into another. If he gave the word they could still fight, but it would mean bloody slaughter, with the advantage of position now being with the outlaws.

Pink, however, was a die-hard. "Let me pop him off, Rowdy," he begged. "I can rivet his windpipe with my left hand at this distance."

Vaughan shook his head. "Take it easy, Pink. Benson would swing while you were doin' it."

"Let Benson speak for himself!" Williams shouted loudly.

A CHORUS of yells arose, and the outlaw leader reached to pull away the gag from Benson's mouth. The captured cowboy drew himself erect, took a deep breath, and shouted:

"Don't give in, Vaughan! Use your guns now and fix these rustlers!"

On the flat shouts and curses filled the air. The Cross L punchers as one man reached for their holsters. The cattle, disturbed by the shouting, added their bellowing to the growing confusion. The outlaw leader raised his hat to bring it down across the rump of Benson's horse.

Vaughan summoned all his lung power. "Hold it, you fools!"

His voice was like the roaring of doom. It electrified the men. Everybody froze as though posing for the photographer to make their tintypes. In the silence that followed a cow bawled once and was still. Quietly Vaughan surveyed his own group of men. Then he spoke.

"Boys, I sure appreciate the way you feel. You've worked hard drivin' these steers here. You've babied this herd along like it was your own personal stock. And now to have to turn it over to a gang of thievin' rustlers. Sure, I know how you feel.

"But Eagle Creek Smith wouldn't want Benson to lose his life that way, even for the herd. So I say we're goin' to surrender. It's my responsibility and my mistake, not yours. That's all men."

"Shuck your guns, cowboys!" yelled the rustler leader. "You there—Vaughan! Drop your hardware and climb up here to palaver with me."

Slowly Vaughan made his way through his group of cowhands and started climbing the slope. His hand went to his belt. He unbuckled his gun and let it fall. He walked on, defenseless.

Behind him the Cross L men were reluctantly disarming. Tears streamed unashamedly down Williams' cheeks. Pink Perkins bowed his head, the broad brim of his Stetson hiding his face. Up on the hill, the rope came down from the sycamore limb, and Charlie Benson's horse started the slow descent bearing him to his friends. He and Vaughan passed with only a burning glance at each other.

The events of the next few hours were like a garish nightmare to the trail herd foreman. As he reached the spot under the tree where the rustler leader waited, two armed outlaws came out of the brush to flank him. Down in the basin other rustlers were moving forward to gather up the firearms of the captured Cross L men.

The leader of the rustlers was a stranger, much to Vaughan's surprise. Where he had thought to see the familiar face of one of the rustling ring he had known above the Canadian line, or possibly a man he had seen lately in Montana, he saw a surly young waddy with beady black eyes and a snarling mouth. A nondescript character of a breed that might well have been handpicked by Mahoney for his nerve and reckless, lawless nature.

A third outlaw came out of the shrubbery leading four saddled horses. The leader ordered Vaughan to mount one. Promptly one of the rustlers tied his feet together beneath the animal's belly. Then the leader spoke to his henchmen.

"You know where to take him, boys." With that he strode down to direct the activities of the rest of his men.

"This was supposed to be a palaver," Vaughan reminded him.

"Shut up, pard," growled one of his captors. "Matt'll talk to you when he gets ready. Let's go."

THE others mounted and, one of them leading Vaughan's horse, they rode back up the hillside and deep into the woods. For at least a quarter of a mile they rode until they reached a small clearing in a desolate looking part of the country. A rude but solidly built one-room cabin was here.

"This is where you roost, Vaughan," one of his guards said, unlashing his feet. "Light down and walk straight."

They conducted Vaughan inside, wasting neither time nor words. Looking around the room, assuring themselves of its surroundings, they left their prisoner, going out and bolting the solid pine door behind them.

Vaughan surveyed his prison for himself, his eyes shifting from the rude bunk in the rear corner to the one window in the room. The glass had been shattered long ago, but a set of iron bars across the frame ruled out the possibility of escape.

There was nothing else to do for the present. With grim resignation Vaughan crossed to the bunk and stretched out to relax on the dirty blanket. In a few minutes he was fast asleep, catching up as he could with his weariness.

How long he slept he wasn't sure, but he awakened to the sound of the bolt being drawn at the door. The room had much the same aspect as when he had dropped off to sleep and it was bright daylight, but he knew by the angle of the sunlight streaming through the window that some time had elapsed.

The door creaked open, shuddering against the wall from the force of a sharp kick. Standing warily in the doorway was the first familiar figure Vaughan had seen since coming into contact with this determined band of rustlers. It was Harry Conroy, his handsome face sardonic, his eyes shiny bright and hard.

Vaughan lay there quietly and stared at him.

"I'm armed and this time you ain't," Conroy drawled. "So you just take it easy. You can tell Eagle Creek Smith—if you ever see him again—that he don't need to bother payin' duty at the Canadian border on his herd. We'll handle that for him. We cross the line free. It's a special courtesy they show us."

CHAPTER XV

Eagle Creek Smells a Rat

MAKING his way back to the Cross L ranch, Eagle Creek Smith had not covered half the distance when he saw more herds approaching. They turned out to be the cattle of Bill Brown and Rodway, line after long line of cows, with the wagons full of supplies going on ahead. The punchers were riding in the saddle alongside to prod the poor beasts into movement. It was a sight all too familiar to Eagle Creek and other Montana ranch owners by now.

"Seems to me you're doin' a lot of ridin' back and forth along these cattle trails, Eagle Creek," said Bill Brown when they met. "What's it all about? Why don't you be sociable and tell us where you're takin' 'em?"

Eagle Creek's eye twinkled. "Ain't it sayin' enough to tell you that I'm leadin' your herds to grass and water?"

"The truth is, Eagle Creek," Bill Brown went on, "you don't have to tell us anything, because we've found out where you're goin' anyway—up north, beyond the Canada line."

Eagle Creek's jaw dropped. "Who told you?"

"Bob Mahoney seems to be pretty well informed."

"Bob Mahoney!"

"Yep. He seemed to be against such a move, so Rodway and I figured it must be a good one."

In that moment, mention of Mahoney was all that was necessary to bring to the fore Eagle Creek Smith's co-operative impulses. He neither liked nor trusted Mahoney, and he both liked and trusted Bill Brown and Rodway.

"Is Rodway a-comin' along with you?"

"He's just behind, gettin' 'round the bend back there. His and mine are big herds to take travelin' this way. But what can you do when all the moisture dries up?"

"Move 'em into Canada," Eagle Creek cried. "Where there's grass and water a-plenty and all it costs is the duty you pay at the line."

Bill Brown nodded knowingly. "So you and Mahoney have got the same source of information, eh?"

"Nosirree," Eagle Creek defended. "I got my story straight from a little bird. Mahoney must have been listenin' at the keyhole."

"That little bird." Bill Brown asked. "It wouldn't be Rowdy Vaughan, by any chance, would it?"

Eagle Creek pulled up startled. "How come you know so much about Rowdy Vaughan?" he countered sharply in return.

"I may know more about Vaughan than you do," said Brown. "I've done a little studyin' on that problem."

"Now don't you go tellin' me any of that line of Mahoney's!" Eagle Creek protested angrily.

"I can relieve you of that worry, Eagle Creek," Bill Brown cut in. "I've looked into all that. There ain't a more honest gent in this whole Northwest than Rowdy Vaughan. You'd do well to place your ranch in his charge."

"That's what I've about done," said Eagle Creek. "But, tell me, how did you find out so much about him, Bill?"

"If you want to know," Bill Brown answered, "I was mighty upset over findin' Rodway's pack-horse Chub trottin' along after him in that big blizzard the first time I ever laid eyes on him. He was ridin' with that Conroy girl. Picked her up in the storm, I guess. But she wouldn't come in because of things I'd said about her brother Harry in times gone by—statements that I haven't found any reason to take back and swallow since.

"Of course, there's nothin' for sure against a fella because he happens to be ridin' a stolen horse or draggin' one behind him. But I wasn't satisfied by his answers. I could see he was kind of sweet on Jessie Conroy. So I made up my mind to do a little investigatin' on my own."

EAGLE CREEK was intensely interested in what he was hearing. "So what did you do?" he asked.

"What I did was to foller that young fella's back trail, and I eventually learned where Chub came from. He came from Harry Conroy's own collection of horses—and nowhere else. Of course, that still doesn't prove anything against Conroy. But while I was hittin' that trail, I ran into Conroy himself. And I always figured he kind of got the idea of what I was doin' back there. It wasn't long afterward that he cleared out of our vicinity entirely. And it doesn't set well with me"—here he leaned forward confidentially toward Eagle Creek—"that Conroy is up near Belknap right now, where our herds are headed, or where yours has already passed by."

"It's all mighty peculiar—what you say," admitted Eagle Creek. "For it was right around Belknap that nobody'd have anything to do with the Cross L in spite of the fact that they was supposed to be rentin' us pasture. Both Rowdy and Pink were convinced Conroy had queered it for us there because he hates them so."

Rodway's herd was already in view. Twenty minutes later Rodway himself rode up and joined them.

"Ain't it right odd, don't you think," asked Eagle Creek shrewdly in the three-cornered conversation that followed, "that Mahoney tried so hard to make things look bad for Rowdy Vaughan—especially after you followin' that old trail and learnin' what you did? Why did you keep so mum about it the day Mahoney had us all there lecturin' us on how to save our cattle?"

Bill Brown paused for a moment, and looked down to where he was pushing around the dust of the trail with the toe of his boot. A wry smile played about his lips.

"Maybe for the same kind of reason that kept you from tellin' us where you were takin' your cattle," he finally admitted. "Apparently we were all a little afraid of one another—just when we had plenty else that we ought to have been afraid of instead."

It was Eagle Creek's turn to look ashamed again. In his guilt, such as it was, he smiled, though; and it was a friendly smile. Premonitions of common dangers were bringing a tardy sense of unity to the honestly inclined members of the western ranchmen's fraternity.

"I sort of thought I did," said Eagle Creek, "but the more I put two and two together, the more I think I better stay up this way with you galoots. I'll go back north along with you, I guess—if you'll have me."

No word was spoken about the rustler trouble that all three ranch owners secretly sensed. Nor was anything said—at that moment—about a common fear, or dislike, of Mahoney. But all three had their ears to the ground. They heard the rumble and they were stronger for joining hands.

* * * * *

Staring up at the man he had sought in vain since that encounter in the saloon at Camas, Rowdy Vaughan wondered at his earlier eagerness for this meeting. A long time ago, he reflected, a girl had looked at him in a certain way. Now that same look burned in her brother's face before him, robbing Vaughan of the impulse to kill.

In spite of his danger, Vaughan found himself smiling at the paradox. Here he was, helpless in the hands of his enemy, and he was experiencing the feeling that he did not want to injure this enemy.

Conroy stood silently in the doorway of the shack, his eyes grave as he studied his prisoner, as though measuring and weighing him.

"You're being a fool, Conroy," Vaughan finally spoke first. "I wasn't sure until now that you were mixed up in this big cattle steal. You've given yourself away. I thought you were strictly a horse thief."

CONROY walked slowly into the room and heeled the door shut without looking, his spur roweling a deep gash in its surface.

"No use tryin' to jump me for my six-gun," he said. "Two of the boys are guardin' this shack with rifles. I didn't come here to gloat, Vaughan. Also you can drop the name-callin'."

"Name-callin'? I'm just callin' things the way I see them, Conroy. Anyway, you've got me right now where you want me?"

"None of that," Conroy answered moodily, turning the only chair in the room around so that he could straddle it and face the man reclining on the bunk. "I don't want you anywhere, Vaughan. I don't like killin' people."

"What about that night in Calgary?" the prisoner reminded him.

Conroy winced. "You just happened to be on the other side of the fence from me," he explained. "You'd gone against the Horseshoe Bar. You were an enemy and I had to get rid of you. Not that it matters now, but I want to tell you that I hated to pull that stunt in Calgary. I'd much rather have had things out with you fair and square."

Vaughan eyed him with level gaze. "Funny, but I almost believe you. Well, pass over that bushwhackin' play at Camas. I reckon you didn't know you was givin' Pink Perkins a stolen horse to square off that fifty-dollar debt, either."

"Of course I knew it. But I was tryin' to pay off a gamblin' debt. How was I to know you would go trottin' right down into the country the jughead came from? But that's neither here nor there. I'm here, huntin' for information."

Vaughan sat up on the bunk, swinging his feet to the floor. "So that's it," he said. "I was wonderin' what brought you to this cabin."

Conroy significantly drew his gun and began hefting it in his hand. He made no reference to it, but Vaughan understood what was meant. He was to keep his seat and make no further sudden moves.

"I've **been** travelin' considerable

lately," Conroy said. "Haven't had time to drop in on my sister. You have. I thought you might like to tell me how she's doin'."

"So you're really interested in her at last," Vaughan said, a sardonic note in his voice. "You tried your best to queer me with her. Why come to me?"

Conroy's answer surprised him. "You can help me—to help her. If you refuse to do that, I'll know you don't really care a hang for her and my problem will be easy. Except for my sister, you're only in my way, Rowdy Vaughan, and the quicker I put you out of it the better."

Vaughan laughed bitterly. "Help her how? Celebrate your runnin' off with Eagle Creek Smith's cattle and makin' a fool out of me?"

The outlaw's reaction was astonishing, vicious, and swift. He sprang up from his chair and started pacing savagely back and forth across the cabin in long, restless strides. He was careful, however, never to turn his back on his prisoner.

"While I'm up here riskin' my neck and headin' the fight for his rustlin' syndicate, Bob Mahoney sits back there on the Chinook, playin' big benevolent cowman and makin' love to my sister. Bob Mahoney! Do you think I'll stand for that? You bet I won't. I know him too well!"

Vaughan flushed angrily. He leaped to his feet, and his captor did not tell him to sit down.

"Then why do you stick to him?" Vaughan asked. "You knew all about Mahoney and his bunch of rustlers and outlaws. Yet you ran the risk of bringin' your sister up against border trash like that?"

"Take it easy, Vaughan!" Conroy snapped. "My relations with Mahoney are none of your business!"

"Oh, yes, they are!" Vaughan snapped back at him. "They're everybody's business in this section of Montana."

BY an effort Conroy regained his calmness. Walking over to his chair, he resumed his seat. "You and I can work together," he said. "We must! We've got to!"

Vaughan waited before answering. Coolly he sized up Conroy. For obviously the outlaw was leading up to a "deal." In the guise of a captor offering a prisoner a chance for his life, Jessie Conroy's brother was in reality pleading with Vaughan.

"Why don't you go straight?" Vaughan asked him. "Then you won't have to worry about gettin' your sister out of this mess?"

Conroy turned haunted eyes upon him. "I can't quit Mahoney," came the surprising answer. "He's got me dead to rights."

Vaughan suddenly felt genuine pity for his captor. Even in that precarious moment, he began again to cherish a dim notion of Conroy's reformation. He made one last desperate attempt.

"If you'd drop this thievin' game right now, Harry Conroy, you and I could join hands and not only save your sister from Bob Mahoney, but rid the whole of Montana of his rottenness!"

What is it that a man fears? In essence, it's not guns and danger that make his blood turn cold and his skin go pale as death, but the spirits of living men—that part of a man that is never seen with physical eyes, yet is always seen and heard and felt in the man's voice and sensed in his every move and word and thought. So Harry Conroy was afraid of Bob Mahoney—mysteriously, unaccountably afraid. And Rowdy Vaughan wasn't. And therein lay the germ of Vaughan's victory.

"I don't dare do it!" Conroy whispered. "I can't get free of him. We're tied up with the same piggin' string."

"Then what do you want me to do?" Vaughan asked bluntly. "What can I do?"

"Go back to Rodway's and get Jessie away from Mahoney," said Conroy. "He wants to marry her, and that's what you've got to stop. I don't know how, but if you'll promise to go back as fast as you can travel and save Jessie, I'll not only free you, but give you your horse and guns back."

A wild thrill of hope stabbed through Rowdy Vaughn. There was yet a chance that he could snatch victory out of defeat.

"I'll see what I can do for you," he said carefully. "But there's a bigger price than my freedom for the job, and you'll have to pay it."

"What's the price?" Conroy asked slowly.

"I've already asked you to come clean and join me," said Vaughn, "and you've refused. You've stolen my cattle herd and I've got to be on the warpath after you. No matter what happens between Bob Mahoney and me, when it's over and if I live, I'm comin' back after you. But first I'll settle Mahoney's hash for good if—and this is my price: you set every Cross L man free and give them back their horses."

Conroy paled perceptibly and licked his lips while he studied the other man's unyielding jaw. "That's a stiff price. I can't quite meet it, anyway. The man you call the Silent One is not a prisoner. He escaped without a horse while we were takin' him prisoner."

"He escaped? Can you prove that?"

"If you'll believe Pink Perkins. He saw it happen and tried to get away at the same time, but we were a little too fast for him."

"I'll believe anything Pink tells me any day in the week," said Vaughan, satisfied. "Where have you got him?"

"I'll bring him to you," said Conroy and got up and went out.

In a short time the key clicked again in Vaughan's cell, and Conroy and another of the rustlers brought in a fuming, raging blond cowboy, his tongue effectively gagged by his own flame-colored scarf.

"If you'll quiet him down," said Conroy, "I'll be able to take this gag out of his mouth, so he can tell you what you want to know."

"Pink," said Rowdy Vaughan, "I'm about to ask you the greatest favor you've ever been asked in your life. Control yourself when that rag you wear around your neck is back where it belongs. We've got a deal on."

CONROY winced at mention of the word "deal." What he was doing obviously galled him. Pink indicated by a reluctant nod that, if Vaughan requested it, he would oblige by shutting up when his scarf was taken off his speaking apparatus. Conroy motioned Vaughan himself to remove the scarf.

"Pink," he asked, as he did so, "what's happened to the Silent One?"

Pink looked questioningly at Vaughan, as though to inquire whether it was all right to tell the truth, then, sizing up matters, spoke: "He just lifted that long right arm of his at the right moment to bop a fella on the bean. He tried to get me free along with him, but it wouldn't work. Where he is now, I ain't got any idea. But I'd be surprised if he ain't communicatin' with the law or with ranchmen all over this here neck of the woods!"

"That's all I wanted to know, Pink," said Vaughan. "You and I've a job to do now, and we're goin' free to do it—by arrangement with Harry Conroy here. The rest of the Cross L boys are goin' free."

"There's one string tied to it," cut in Conroy. "This all must be kept secret between us—the other boys we let loose mustn't know how it all happened."

Pink obliged by walking out with the rustler who had brought him there. Naturally, Conroy's treachery must not get back to the cold-blooded Mahoney. Vaughan would guard that secret for Jessie Conroy's sake.

"Put the men where I can see 'em free, Conroy," said Vaughan. "That's the only way I'll believe you."

Conroy swallowed hard but assented. He paused at the door of the cabin.

"Stay here till sunset," he said. "When you hear a click in the keyhole of that door, that will mean that it's been opened for you to go. If you stand there, you'll see your men ridin' by. Don't speak to them or let them know you see. If you do, I'll be near by to shoot you down. After they've gone, Pink Perkins will come ridin' by last and you can join him on the horse that will be waitin' for you in back of the house. But don't

tell him what the deal is. That's your bargain, Vaughan. Your men simply escaped—that's all. I leave it to you to shut Perkins up in your own way."

"It may be managed," said Vaughan. "What'd you do with Pink now?"

"We're keepin' him—and you—till sunset," Conroy answered. "And we're keepin' you separate."

"I ought to be demandin' the herd, too," said Vaughan. "And believe me, Conroy, I would—except that, to keep Mahoney quiet, I know you've got to turn over the cattle to the Canadian receiver. He'll forgive escaped prisoners—if he ever learns about them. But he'll never forgive your lettin' the cattle slip through your fingers."

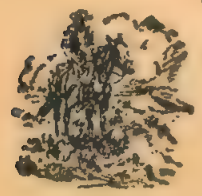
Harry Conroy was silent. If he hated Vaughan for the innuendoes, he knew when it was good policy to keep his mouth shut. Dealing with a man who knew the score was always easier than trying to work with a well-meaning blunderer who didn't know what it was all about. When that man was bitten, in addition, by the bug of honesty, so much the better!

"Any time you want to talk to me about changin' your colors," Vaughan went on at length, "I'll do what I can to help you."

"My life's my own," Conroy responded sulkily. "Your freedom—and your men's—is the price I'm payin' to save my sister from a skunk. It's a stiff price, and I'm putting myself in danger by payin' it. I'm not payin' any more, either, by tyin' up my own future before I'm ready to. If we ever meet again, Vaughan, we can settle what troubles we have between us when that time comes."

"Then we stay enemies for keeps, Conroy."

"You got the idea plenty clear, Rowdy Vaughan!"



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CHAPTER XVI

Road to Reckoning

CROSS L men had ridden by, all of them, as Conroy had promised. Vaughan had counted them, or tried to, and had secretly recognized many of the faces as he watched them from behind a shuttered window. The red fires of sunset tinged even these dark woods, their red-gold light filtering through the leaves hypnotically.

Then Pink rode past, his flaming kerchief flying free.

Following Conroy's instructions, Vaughan did not cry out to his friend. He rushed out behind the house and mounted the waiting horse. In a few seconds he had caught up with the surprised Pink.

"Rowdy," the little man whispered excitedly, "you sure must have something on that two-faced badman to get us out of his clutches."

"That, Pink, is a story you'll hear later on. Don't ask me any more now!"

Disappointment and hurt shone in Pink's face. Vaughan watched him silently for a moment. Then:

"Pink," he said, "you're free as all outdoors. Don't ask questions now. The worst news I have is that I've got to ride off alone. I've got a special job to do."

"Up in Canada?" Pink asked. "A job for that coyote you made the deal with? Is that it?"

"No," Vaughan said. "It's in the opposite direction, and I've got to go. Come with me a way. I'll duck away by a back trail the first company we meet. I've got a personal job to do before I take another crack at this rustling syndicate."

"I don't like the sound of it, Rowdy."

Hours later, the two cowboys mounted a rocky ridge and halted to scan the horizon. Cattle were in sight in the distance. Though Vaughan had no way of

knowing it, they belonged to the herds being shepherded by Rodway and Bill Brown.

"Pink," said Vaughan, "tell them to hang back till they are backed by a sheriff and a good-sized posse. Make them understand how well these rustlers are organized. Tell them we escaped, and you don't know what has become of me —which you won't know, either, by that time. And don't leave the law out of it, either. We're up against some of the toughest outlaws in the Northwest, and don't forget it!"

In a moment only a cloud of dust at a curve in the trail gave any hint that Rowdy Vaughan had ever been there. Pink took off his hat, and meditatively toyed with it, poking his finger through a bullet-hole that had been added to its decorations. Disconsolately, yet trustingly, he ruminated to himself:

"I wonder if that fool Rowdy knows what he's up to. It must have somethin' to do with that crooked Conroy's sister."

Before he knew it, Pink was alongside Bill Brown's and Rodway's wagons, which were pulling off the trail to make camp for the evening. A rider was coming forward to greet him. To his amazement, it was one he had least expected.

"Then they didn't get you?" Pink asked.

"I was never more free nor more happy to see anyone in my life," the Silent One admitted. "Where's your sidekick?"

"He escaped," Pink said. "And right now I ain't got the faintest idea where he is."

"Escaped!" exclaimed the Silent One, astonished. "From that crowd?"

"Yes," said Pink, looking up at the sky and whistling. "He's gone off into the dusk. I saw him."

"And *you* escaped, too, Pink?"

"Yes. I'll tell you all about it—at some distant time in the future," said Pink. "Right now, don't you think this cow outfit behind you is gettin' too close to danger for its own good?"

"It's part of a plan, Pink," the Silent One explained. "After the battle in the basin, I followed a blind trail to what I thought was Mahoney's hideout. It turned into a false lead. When I got back, I found the herd in other hands, so I rode like blazes to find help. This is it. I've had time to inform them all —Bill Brown and Rodway, and Eagle Creek's back there with that outfit, too. We've even passed the news on to the sheriff and deputy marshal of Sanders County. Their idea is for the herds to go on moving as they have done up to now, just to lure these outlaws into the open."

PINK stared at the Silent One thoughtfully for a moment.

"Are you sure the sheriff and deputy marshal ain't in cahoots with the rustlers?" asked Pink suspiciously.

"Really, Mr. Perkins!" said the Silent One in his best Eastern accents. "One has to trust someone, doesn't one?"

"I do," Pink answered, "but it ain't cattle thieves nor sheriffs!"

"By the way, Pink," said the Silent One, attempting to change the subject, "you haven't asked me what I'm doin' up front with this outfit of Bill Brown's."

"What?" Pink asked with sudden interest.

"I'm assistant cook."

"You mean, I got to eat your grub if I stay with this outfit?" Pink feigned complete collapse. "By the way, Jim," he added, "I happen to be hungry. Get to work!"

Eagle Creek and Bill Brown rode up at suppertime, and again Pink became the subject of wonder for what was supposed to be his miraculous escape from the outlaws.

"What's the news of my herd?" Eagle Creek asked.

"Your herd's gone—for the present," replied Pink. "But I got a good hunch you're goin' to get it back before long. That's the next stage of the war."

They looked up at the stars in the clear Montana sky, and listened to the songs of the cowboys, now gentle, now brisk and salty, and, even with all the troubles that surrounded them, they took time out to marvel at the beauty of nocturnal space.

One cowpuncher, on that crystal night, was not watching the sky, nor yet dreaming of a girl named Jessie. Rowdy Vaughan was riding alone, as fast as considerations of safety would permit under a moon that was close to full. He knew well these Montana trails and, taking only time enough to satisfy his hunger, he was off again toward Rodway's home ranch.

It was a matter of days before he arrived, and true to his word, his first act was to seek Jessie Conroy. It was she herself who answered his knock at the Rodway door. Her manner was cool, yet she silently permitted him to enter. Vaughan, for his part, found it equally convenient to adopt the attitude of polite formality.

"Mr. Vaughan," she said with quiet reserve. "I hope you've come to apologize for misjudging my brother, Harry."

If there was anything that Vaughan had come back for, it was not that. He said so—calmly. She continued relentlessly:

"Perhaps you want to apologize for sending Mr. Perkins to speak for you."

"You're makin' a slight mistake," he answered. "I didn't send Pink. I'd have bound and tied him if I'd known he had anything like that in his fool head. But I'm not sayin' what he told you ain't true. Just because Pink was crazy for comin' to you that way, I can't deny that there was truth in every word he told you. Your brother's no sweet character, as I've got more reason than ever to know since I've been up north. But that's not what I've come to talk about, either."

"I think I can guess the subject," she answered stiffly, "and I think I can save you the trouble of discussing it. It may interest you to know that I mean to be married shortly." She ignored the anguish in his eyes.

"Meaning?" Rowdy Vaughan's heart sank as he spoke.

"His name is Robert Mahoney."

"Jessie!" The exclamation burst from him with all the sincerity that could fill a man's voice or show on his countenance. Then slowly. "You're making the biggest mistake of your life."

As she turned to leave the room, Vaughan restrained her with a gentle hand.

"Mr. Vaughan, let me go!"

"Jessie, I won't—not till you've listened to what I have to say! If I've offended you again, you'll have to forgive me if you can. Loving you as I do, I'd be the worst possible kind of man if I didn't speak out."

"Talk quickly, then! What is it?"

"Sit down! It's goin' to take a little time. You've got to have patience, for I scarce know how to begin."

SOMETHING in the pleading note of his eyes and voice, or perhaps her own curiosity, made the girl do his bidding.

"I saw your brother," Vaughan began.

"You saw Harry?" the girl repeated. A faint hope flickered in her breast. In her eyes was the momentary fleeting dream of a happy ending that would at last bring these two men together. These two men, and perhaps— But Vaughan's next words dashed her dream.

"Jessie, there can't ever be any peace between us," he said. "Harry and I can see eye to eye on only one important matter. And that's why I'm here now, when I ought to be after his skin!"

"I know you hate him," she said quietly. "Now, please—what is the 'one important matter' that interests him?"

"It's this, Jessie," he replied. "Your brother's got sense enough to know—if you haven't—that I love you! And, believe me, no matter what I may think of him, one credit-mark goes up to his name. He sure does love his sister!"

"This sounds strange, indeed, coming from you, Mr. Vaughan!"

"There's one thing he wants, above everything else, Jessie, to save you from."

"And you're his messenger?"

"You're puttin' it something like it is," Vaughan replied.

"Why doesn't he come himself?"

"Because he can't do this particular job, Jessie. He can't save you from—from—Mahoney!"

"Save me!" she exclaimed. "That's absurd! I'm engaged to marry Bob Mahoney."

"Jessie, you can't marry that man. He's the real cause of your brother's trouble—outside of Harry's own weakness. He's the cause of much of my own. He's ruined other people's lives. He's ruined your brother's—and he'll ruin yours, if you give him half a chance!"

While he spoke, Jessie Conroy had been fighting for control. Now, in the momentary silence, the words she sought for would not come. Suddenly her reserve melted. She dropped to the sofa, head in her hands, and let the tears flow as they would.

Without knowing it, she had discovered her most potent weapon—the sight of a single tear is often sufficient to break the most hide-bound masculine resolve. Vaughan stood it for thirty seconds, then groped for conciliation.

"Jessie, your brother could tell you plenty!"

She sobbed once, then raised her tear-stained face. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that your brother's scared to death of Mahoney—turns white at the thought of him."

"But Harry's brave!"

"Yes, in some ways he is brave. I admit it. And don't blame him for what he isn't! He can't help himself any more than—I can help lovin' you, Jessie! The very thought of Mahoney frightens the livin' daylights out of him. He can be brave where other fellows are concerned. But with Mahoney, he's different!"

"Did he tell you this?"

"He showed me it!"

"Showed you! How?"

"I was your brother's prisoner, Jessie," Vaughan said. "Believe me, this ain't easy for me to say. But Mahoney heads the biggest cattle-rustlin' ring in Montana, and your brother takes his orders."

"Harry? Takes orders?"

"Yes, Jessie! That's how it is! And I'm here to tell you the story because your brother can't take the risk. Mahoney watches him too well. So Harry let me and the Cross L men go—after he had us prisoner and his gang had rustled our cattle up north there—for Mahoney!"

IN Jessie Conroy's eyes there was no sign of tears—only a horrible suspicion that was slowly taking shape despite her desperate inward denials. Suddenly there was no more anger—no more resentment. She caught Vaughan's eyes, impelled by a terrible, nagging fear.

"Go back and save Harry!" she pleaded.

For the first time that evening, Vaughan breathed easily. "Your brother," he said, "has got to save himself. I tried—and failed. He's too scared!"

"I can't believe you," she cried. Yet the suspicion was full-grown now, driving her to a stronger decision. "I'm going up north myself to see Harry."

It was Vaughan's turn to be concerned. He said gravely, "Jessie, that's no woman's country. You wouldn't even know where to find Harry. You're best out of it. Believe me, it's what Harry would want me to say."

"But Harry's my brother!" she said simply. "I'm going—with you."

"I didn't say I'd take you."

"You've made some strong accusations," she said stubbornly. "I'm asking you to take me where you can prove them!"

"Jessie," Vaughan interrupted, "just where is Mahoney?"

"He rode north," she answered, "two days ago."

"Then there's goin' to be a gun battle as sure as I'm standing here, and you're askin' me to put you in the middle of it."

"You forget—Harry!"

Vaughan would have been delighted to forget her brother, but he didn't say so. "Think what it's like, Jessie," he said. "Dirt and men and horses and cattle—and more of the same! To top it all off, you would have to be the guest of Bill Brown, the man you wouldn't even go near a little while back!"

"I'd do—anything—for Harry!"

"I just can't be responsible!" he protested. "What do you think the boys would say to my bringing a woman in?"

"If you won't take me, I'll follow you!"

And thus the matter was decided.

If Vaughan objected to having a woman on a man's trip with him, or hated to think what trouble that woman might cause before she was through, he at least enjoyed her company during the next few days of travel.

He fancied that, mingled with her anxiety for her brother, was a measure of delight in the journey itself. On their second evening out, as their campfire smouldered, he thought of her asleep there, far enough away to satisfy the conventions—if that word had place in these lonely hills. A strange destiny linked the two of them. For months on end he had dreamed of being near her, as now he was; and now he should be happy, but could only torture himself with the thought that everything was all wrong.

Next night, over his coffee by the camp fire, Vaughan quietly watched Jessie Conroy as she sat gazing into the flames. His every nerve and fiber strained toward this woman—gentle, firm, a match for any one's obstinacy, particularly his own. Yet he still dared not approach her as he longed to do with all the love of his heart.

"It isn't fair, Jessie," he said finally, breaking the stillness punctuated only by the crackling of the flames.

She held herself from crying only by the firmest effort of will. Her burning eyes, brighter than ever in the firelight, reflected the flames as though they had been deep, dark pools; for they were filled with tears which Jessie Conroy would not let flow though they all but burst the dam of her emotions.

For a long time she and Vaughan sat thus, till the firelight died. When finally the girl rose to retire for the night, Vaughan gently kissed her forehead. She offered no objection, for somehow, in three days of travel together, she had learned to trust him and to respect his restraint and reticence.

And when she was lying in her sleeping-sack, Vaughan walked over near to her and looked down, silently blessing and loving her.

"Good night!" he said.

"Good night!" he heard the girl reply, scarcely above a whisper, yet in a voice vibrant with much that could never be told in words.

CHAPTER XVII

Six-gun Pay-off

KEEN-EYED and watchful, the marshal of Sanders County rode up to the cowboy and the girl on the trail, making no attempt to conceal his curiosity.

"You look familiar to me," the marshal said to Vaughan. "I don't know your name, but you got a face I remember from somewhere."

"Do you want to know where we met, Marshal?" Vaughan asked.

"Where was it?"

"At the Come Again in Camas. You got a good look at me in the dark—for just a minute—before another fellow with a long arm gave you a gentle rap and laid you out for a short spell."

"Who was that fella?"

"Too dark to see," Vaughan said, watching Jessie Conroy out of the corner of his eye.

The marshal glanced at the girl. "And who are you, miss?"

"Miss Jessie Conroy," Vaughan answered.

The marshal stared him down. "Nobody's askin' you to talk, son. You're under arrest!"

"For what,"

"For attackin' an officer of the law that night in Camas. Besides, we got too many cattle rustlers runnin' around without their brands showin'. I'll just take you in tow so's I'll know where

you're at. You come along, too, Miss—Conroy. Conroy!" He took off his broad hat and scratched his furrowed brow as though straining for a memory. Apparently it did not come. He shook his head. "The whole blamed business is so big now that sometimes I think half the countryside must be in the rustlin' game!"

"There—you see!" said Jessie Conroy, taking quick advantage of the marshal's remark.

"See what?" asked the marshal.

"Listen here, my friend," Vaughan put in, "you said you were arresting me. If that's so, what jail are you takin' me to?" His question diverted the marshal's attention from a subject that might have proved more embarrassing to Miss Conroy than that of her own brother.

"Right now, son," said the marshal, "I ain't on my way to no jail, so I can't oblige you with an immediate answer. But you can just go along with me for the present."

"And where will that lead us to?" asked Vaughan.

"You'll find out soon enough," said the marshal, "when you see some herds and wagons on the move."

"You're joinin' up with Bill Brown's and Rodway's herds?" queried Vaughan. "And old Eagle Creek Smith?"

"I sure am," said the marshal. "We're on the warpath!"

Rowdy Vaughan could hardly conceal his enthusiasm, mingled with which was a deep desire to spare the girl from an open encounter with her brother or Mahoney—or, what was worse, with both together.

When they finally came within sight of the herds, Vaughan advised her not to talk about her brother to anyone if she could help it. He feared what might be said to her if she ventured any such conversation. And most of all, he feared what she would learn if the battle should really eventuate as he expected it would. Still, she had claimed to want the truth about Harry Conroy. And much as it pained him to see her pained, he was fast becoming reconciled to the fact that she would have to learn the truth in its raw nakedness. The time had gone by when he could lighten her burden in that respect.

They had already passed the drag, and were fast approaching the leaders of the herd. Eagle Creek came riding up with Rodway and Brown.

"Where in Tophet have you been, Rowdy?" he yelled.

"I had a little trouble," Vaughan said.

"Yep, we know all about it. Pink told us."

"Pink!" Vaughan feigned surprise. "Then you know about your cattle?"

EAGLE CREEK nodded, smiling. "It's all right, Rowdy. We understand the decision you had to make. It was the only choice you had. Anyway, we're aimin' to take back them cows—that is, if the gang ain't got wind yet that half of Montana is out to get them."

"Half of Montana after the other half of Montana!" was Bill Brown's appraisal of the situation.

"Where is Pink now?" Vaughan asked.

"He and Jim both vanished into thin air a couple of days ago," said Eagle Creek. "I can't imagine what got into them."

"Together?" asked Vaughan.

"As far as I can tell," answered Eagle Creek. "I didn't see 'em go, or I might have had something to say about it myself."

Some news had surely come to the Silent One and Pink, that they should unaccountably disappear in this fashion. As Vaughan put two and two together, the Silent One had probably learned of Mahoney's presence in the region and had gone out on a man-hunt. But Pink? What strange companions those two would be, without Vaughan's own intermediary qualities to soften the rough edges! Somehow their absence worried him.

"What I wouldn't give to find out what that little rascal is up to," mused Vaughan, contemplating some of the possibilities. "He always thought the law was too slow. And he is probably

taking matters into his own hands. I hope he comes out whole; it's a tough outfit he's up against this time."

"What'd we ever do if any harm came to Goldylocks?" asked Eagle Creek, echoing Vaughan's sentiments with precision. "Well, with all these reinforcements we got, maybe the devils will be nailed before they do him any harm."

Somehow Bob Mahoney was more and more in Vaughan's mind. Now that they were with the herds, Vaughan left Jessie Conroy with Rodway's wagon supplies. There she helped prepare the meals, and made herself at home, as she had done at the Rodway ranch. This disposition of her had the double advantage of keeping her at least a little distant from Bill Brown, though her sentiments toward him did not seem to bother her much any longer; there were too many weightier matters to think about.

The question of Vaughan's arrest by the marshal was promptly settled by Eagle Creek, the marshal riding off alone to gather up a posse ahead of the herds.

On the afternoon of his departure, the cow camp was treated to a terrific uproar as a rider came galloping in, stirring a frightful dust. Through the yellow cloud, Vaughan recognized a familiar shock of curly hair of the same yellow color, and caught a glimpse of a flame-colored neckerchief.

"I saw them! I saw them!" the rider yelled, dismounting. Then, with a loud yelp of enthusiasm as he spotted his friend: "Rowdy!" and Pink ran up and whacked Vaughan on the shoulder.

"For gosh' sakes, what'd you see?" Vaughan inquired, amused.

"Conroy and Mahoney—talkin' together!" exclaimed Pink excitedly.

"Where?" asked Vaughan.

"Up in the woods," said Pink, "at that shack."

Rodway turned to Eagle Creek. "I reckon you know now," he offered.

"They were inside the house," Pink continued, "and I was outside, among the trees, lookin' in. I could hear every word they said. And they was arguin' about you, Rowdy!"

"Rowdy!" Bill Brown exclaimed.

"Hold it," Vaughan interrupted. "Pink, have they had time to pull out—or do they know we're comin' for 'em?"

Pink shook his head. "Not Mahoney—he don't. He's so cocky he'd brazen it out with a whole congress of sheriffs even if they caught him red-handed. Now let's get off fast, with a bunch big enough to do somethin'!"

"One minute," Vaughan cautioned a second time.

In his mind was the thought of Jessie Conroy. Here she was in the presence of her friends and neighbors—a hundred odd of them, with more waiting up the line—and all of them intent on one objective: a rustler chief and his lieutenants. The fact that one of those lieutenants happened to be Jessie Conroy's brother would carry little weight. When they caught him, their justice would be swift. Vaughan knew what that justice would be. His one thought was to prevent the girl—and as many of the others as he could—from witnessing it. How he didn't know. But do it he must.

VAUGHAN turned to Eagle Creek. "A hundred men and several thousand head of cattle are goin' to make easy spottin' for any outlaws holed up in them woods. I say let me and Pink go on ahead. We'll give you directions how to get to the lake, and pick you up at the edge of the woods before dawn."

Eagle Creek nodded. "Sounds like a good idea!"

"All right," Vaughan decided. "We'll leave now. It's a good ten or fifteen miles to the lake. When the sheriff gets here with his posse, tell him to wait till sundown, then start his men from here. This trail will take him into the lake basin."

"Right," Eagle Creek agreed. "We'll stop the herd and make camp right here."

Vaughan nodded. "Come along, Pink," he ordered, taking the little man's arm before the others could ask him any more questions.

For a long time after they hit the trail, Vaughan maintained a thoughtful si-

lence. Pink was bursting with curiosity, yet he respected his partner's reticent mood. Finally, Vaughan spoke.

"Where's Jim?" he asked.

"Don't know." Pink shrugged. "He just disappeared on me without givin' notice. I wouldn't worry, though. The way he gets around, there ain't nobody goin' to notice him 'less he wants to be noticed. I reckon he'll find us before we find him."

Vaughan nodded, and resumed his thoughts. In his mind ran an inescapable picture of Jessie Conroy looking head-on at the truth—her brother convicted as a thief and accomplice of the rustling ring, serving a sentence in Deer Lodge—or worse, if the posse's temper was short. The thought was horrible. It was stark cruelty. He spurred his horse anew, forcing a shout from Pink as the little man hurried to catch up.

The sun was just sinking over the hills as they came in sight of the ridge that hid the lake basin. The sheriff's men should just be leaving Eagle Creek's camp about now. Vaughan altered his course, keeping to the shelter of the ridge as much as possible. When the two horses topped the ridge, it was full dark, and Vaughan halted for a review of plans.

"We'd better go on foot from here," he suggested.

"Anything you say," Pink said. "But what are we supposed to do?"

Vaughan gritted his teeth with impatience. "Look, Pink," he said suddenly. "I know what you think about me and Jessie Conroy. I know what you've done to try to break us up. Well, whether we're broken up or not, she's the one woman I've always wanted. I may not get her, but by Heaven, I'm not goin' to sit by and see her suffer because her brother is a rustler. That's why I couldn't stand to have you blabbin' your mouth to Rodway and Brown and the rest—shamin' her into everlastin' torture by people who ain't fit to dust her boots, good as they are!"

A shocked silence followed the outburst. It held for almost a minute, then Pink's voice broke it, quietly.

"Golly, Rowdy, I just didn't understand." A note of hope entered his voice. "But I'll make it up to you! See if I don't. Why, I'll keep this thing quiet if I have to kidnap Conroy myself and carry him over into Calgary!"

In the darkness, Vaughan's hand went out upon the little man's shoulder. "That won't be necessary," he said warmly. "There's no gettin' around the law. It's enough to know that you're with me again."

"With you!" Pink was his normal self again. "Pardner, I'm 'way ahead of you. Come on, let's get goin'!"

Together, they skirted the lake's edge, keeping to the shelter of the trees as much as possible. Among the rocks at the foot of the wooded slope, Vaughan paused.

"Here's where we branch off to the cabin," he said.

PINK grunted his understanding. They crawled up the slope. Once among the trees, they could afford to approach with less chance of being seen. The trail taken by Vaughan's horse on the day of the surrender was clear, and they walked it side by side. Minutes later they came upon the cabin. Vaughan grabbed Pink's arm.

"A light in the window," he whispered. "Let's see if we can surprise the critter that's burnin' it."

They edged into the clearing, guns drawn. Pink's curiosity drove him ahead to the window. He removed his hat and peered over the sill, then turned back three paces to meet Vaughan.

"In case you ever had any doubts," he whispered. "Come look and be convinced."

Vaughan looked.

Inside, the cabin presented the same appearance as on his first visit to it. The only things added were a small wooden table and a straight-backed chair. On the table was a leather saddle-bag spilling over with papers and currency. In the chair, looking strangely out of character, was Bob Mahoney!

There was no one else in the room.

Mahoney was apparently waiting for someone, and not relishing the waiting game. He slipped a watch from his pocket, glanced at it, and placed it on the table. Impatiently, he drew out a cigar, bit off the end and held a match to it. It failed to soothe his nerves. Rising, he paced to the door, reached for the latch, changed his mind and returned to the table. He had barely seated himself when a knock sounded on the door.

Outside, Vaughan started uncomfortably. He had detected no approaching footstep. If someone could reach the door that quietly— In the dim glow of the window, his eyes met Pink's.

"I'm watchin' four ways at once," the little cowboy assured in a whisper. "I ain't seen nothin' or nobody. They can't pick us out for these shadows."

In the cabin, Mahoney had stirred at the knock, a look of relief on his coarse, square features.

"Come on in, Harry," he boomed.

The door opened slowly. In the shadows behind it, a voice spoke softly:

"Sorry, Mr. Conroy has been unavoidably detained."

Mahoney half-rose in his chair, his hand darting inside his coat. At the same time, the muzzle of a gun poked out of the doorway into the room.

As Mahoney hesitated, the gun moved forward, followed by the figure of the Silent One. Vaughan gasped at his appearance. The Silent One was hatless, but a hat would have been an impossible accessory atop the bandage he wore around his forehead. It was the remains of one of his shirtsleeves, and it bore a forbidding red stain above the right temple. Despite his wound, the man seemed steady enough, and Vaughan controlled his impulse to enter the room. From outside the window, he covered Mahoney's actions with his own six-gun.

"Mr. Conroy has been unavoidably detained," the Silent One repeated, closing the door behind him. "He is undoubtedly ministering to the needs of one Hoss Wallaby who had the misfortune to drop on me from a tree while I was looking elsewhere." He motioned to his head. "Don't let this fool you, Mahoney. I was never in greater possession of my senses. And, in a moment, I shall proceed to deprive you of yours—with my bare fists!"

While he spoke, Mahoney's mouth had been working convulsively. Now he caught his breath.

"Jim Hogan!" he sputtered. "Jim—wait. You don't know what you're doing! It's all a mistake. You don't know me, Jim!"

"Raise your arms!" the Silent One ordered. With rough efficiency, he went over Mahoney's clothes, removed a fancy .38 from a shoulder holster, broke it, and spilled the shells on the floor. He tossed the gun into a corner and sheathed his own.

"Defend yourself!" he ordered.

"Wait!" Mahoney argued fearfully. "Jim, I've been plannin' to ride over to see your mother. I was going to return the deed to your father's old ranch!"

SWIFTLY, the Silent One's open hand whipped out, slapping the words from Mahoney's mouth. With a hoarse roar, Mahoney swung forward. The Silent One ducked, and rose into the charge, his fist smashing Mahoney back into the bunk.

At the window, Vaughan grabbed at Pink. "That bellow will bring company! Let's be ready for it." As Pink made to turn away, Vaughan restrained him. "You cover Jim," he ordered. "I'll hold off the others when they come."

Pink waved his gun at the trees. "It'll take a lot of holdin'. Here they come!"

There was a crashing among the trees, and a figure broke into the clearing, running for the cabin. Vaughan waited for it to come, then threw himself in a flying dive that caught it at the corner of the shack. He rolled to come up on top, straddled the man's chest, and quieted him with a single smashing blow. He half-rose to find two more coming from the woods.

A short figure intercepted them, throwing itself headlong in the path of the one in the lead. Vaughan leaped across the few remaining yards. His fist struck the second one in the middle

as he raised a boot to crash down on Pink, now rolling in the dust with the first. The man doubled up, tried to butt, and met Vaughan's knuckles in a stunning blow to the jaw. He went down as though pole-axed. Pink got up off the remaining figure.

To the men on the ground, the fight was now only a dream.

The two comrades collected the three limp forms, dragging them to the side of the shack where they tied them up with their own belts and neckerchiefs.

"Now let's go in and finish the other one," Pink suggested.

VAUGHAN shook his head. "It's Jim's fight. Let him finish it."

He glanced over the sill. In a far corner of the room, the Silent One was bending over Mahoney. Laboriously, he pulled him to his feet, then sent him crashing down again with a blow to the chin. Mahoney's eyes were half open. His arms swung limply. Twice more the Silent One raised the rustler chief. Twice more he smashed his fist against the heavy features. Then, weakened and sore, he stumbled to the smashed table in the center of the room, picked up the fallen chair, and leaned against it. For an instant he swayed, passing his hand over his forehead.

Then, in an agony of weariness, he slumped to the floor.

Vaughan decided it was time. "Watch these critters," he ordered Pink. "We'll carry 'em in after I make sure of Mahoney." He started away and hesitated. In the far corner of the room something had stirred. Mahoney was pulling himself to his feet. He reached for the saddle-bag which lay on the floor beside him.

His hand went into it, and came away holding a gun on the fallen figure of the Silent One.

Vaughan grabbed for his own gun. As he opened his mouth to stop Mahoney, the door of the cabin crashed open for the second time that evening. This time it was the right visitor. Harry Conroy stood there, breathless, surveying the chaos on the cabin floor. In a matter of seconds he had pieced the scene together.

"Mahoney!" he shouted. "Wait!"

Slowly Mahoney swerved. His heavy-lidded eyes took in the form of his lieutenant. Around the corners of his mouth the shadow of a smile curled, twisting itself into a triumphant sneer.

"You're a little late, Conroy," he snarled. "A little too late!"

In that instant, Vaughan read the purpose in those little brutal eyes, in the twist of the heavy leering face. As he cocked the hammer of his six-gun, a strong hand grasped his wrist. While he fought to disengage it, a gun roared in the room!

As Vaughan watched, Harry Conroy clutched at his shirt-front, one hand reaching out for the door jamb. Slowly, he slid to his knees. With a supreme effort, he threw his head back, forcing his body erect.

His hand came away from his side, lifted, and his bloody fingers pulled the trigger of his six-gun.

An expression of unutterable surprise spread over Mahoney's face as the first bullet hit him. His flat lips parted and he stared, his body jerking as the bullets slammed into his fat flesh—once, twice, three times!

Then, like a giant tree before the woodsman's ax, he crashed to the floor in a lifeless heap.

AT the window, Vaughan shook his head as though clearing it of an unhappy memory. A hand was still holding his wrist, preventing his aim. It was Pink's hand.

He turned.

"I'm sorry," Pink gulped. "I thought it was better this way."

Vaughan nodded. "Let's get this buzzard bait inside," he said.

Together, they carried the three bound rustlers into the cabin. Pink turned their faces to the light one by one. Only one of the three was familiar—Ben Tucker, the Horseshoe Bar cowpuncher who had played the part of Mahoney's personal emissary throughout the whole campaign.

Vaughan shook him into consciousness. He pointed out the bodies of Mahoney and Conroy. The Silent One, unconscious but on the mend, had been deposited gently on the bunk where he now lay sleeping off his weakness.

Ben Tucker stared around him in surprise.

"Looks like the jig's up, Tucker," Vaughan said. He pointed to the bodies. "They're the lucky ones. For you, it's a rope!"

Wild-eyed, Tucker raised himself to a sitting position. "Not me!" he bawled. "I ain't done nothin'. Rowdy, you know I ain't no good for rough stuff. Why, Mahoney wouldn't never even let me carry a gun!"

"All right, all right," Vaughan soothed. "Then who were in it?"

"It was him." Tucker babbled appreciatively. "Him and Conroy and Bridger and Wallaby—the whole Horseshoe Bar!"

Vaughan interrupted. "Never mind about Conroy. Would you be willing to mention all those others at the trial?"

Tucker's head bobbed.

"Sure, Rowdy, sure. You know I ain't like the others."

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Vaughan smiled. "Sure, Ben," he said.

A volley of shots broke up the conversation.

"We're in for it," Pink yelled, rushing for the window.

A voice sounded across the clearing. "Yellow hair! I see yellow hair. You in the cabin, name yourselves!"

"That's Eagle Creek's voice!" Vaughan exclaimed.

Pink threw wide the door.

"Come and get us, you mossy-horn. And you'll answer to us for bein' late in comin'!"

* * * * *

All things resolve themselves in the light of day. Sorrow seems somehow to be mitigated, and the good things of life become better under the spiritual ministration of an azure sky. The Indians who once peopled the broad plains of the American northwest have a saying: "Though I may die, this much I know: The sun will shine, the grass will grow."

Standing over a fresh earthen mound on the hillside overlooking the lake basin, Rowdy Vaughan bethought himself of the saying, and the sighing of the wind in the trees carried away some of his own sadness. Hat in hand, he began the slow descent to the basin.

Emerging onto the flat, he found before him a scene of bucolic peace. In the night, the herds shepherded by Rodway and Brown had joined Eagle Creek's dogies in the basin. Cookfires had sprung up all along the stretch of green to northward of the lake, and the voices of cowboys were heard singing here and there, relaxing over the holiday proclaimed before the final big push into the north country.

As he approached Rodway's camp Vaughan was singled out by Pink, who detached himself temporarily from the first bacon and eggs he had tasted in days.

"It's all set, Rowdy," he said. "There ain't a soul in camp who doesn't know that Conroy shot Mahoney to save the Silent One's life." He winked archly, wiping coffee from his lips with the edge of his hand.

VAUGHAN viewed him sternly. "If you don't think it's true, why are you tellin' it that way?"

"Oh, it's true, all right," Pink hastened to assure him. "And it's the first fine thing I've known him to do, God rest the critter's soul. I was winkin' for another reason."

"What's that?"

Pink grinned. "You'll find her in the second tent on the left. And if I ain't mistaken, she's waitin' on you with the biggest breakfast a cowhand's ever had this side of barbecue heaven."

Vaughan's expression went grave. "I wish I had you to tell it for me, Pink."

Pink gave him a helpful push. "Speak for yourself, John. I've got vittles waitin'."

Vaughan picked his way among the eating cowboys, nodding silently to the

greetings that met his ears. Before the door of the second tent, he hesitated.

A soft voice hailed him. "Won't you come in, Rowdy Vaughan?"

He started nervously. He removed his hat with awkward care, then drew the flap and entered.

Jessie Conroy had her back to him. From a Dutch oven on a little stool she removed a plate of bacon and eggs, setting it on a chest pulled out into the middle of the tent. She poured coffee from a full pot, and uncovered a plate of biscuits with loving care. Then she rose to face him.

He could tell that at some time, recently, she had been crying. But the signs had been carefully washed from the dark eyes, and an expression of peace and outward cheer met his inquiring glance.

"Won't you be seated, Mr. Vaughan?" she invited with a gentle smile.

He blinked and looked around uncertainly with awkward concern for his surroundings.

"Jessie," he said softly. "Jessie."

And the next instant she was in his arms. He breathed the warm fragrance of her hair and ran trembling fingers through it, hugging her tightly against him.

He kissed her once, and let out all his pent-up bitterness in a long, blessed sigh.

"Jessie," he whispered. "you've heard?"

Her head on his shoulder gave a little nod.

He brushed his lips against her hair. "I've come," he said, "I've come to apologize. About Harry, dearest—I was so wrong!"

She leaned back, tilting her head to look squarely into his eyes. Fresh tears welled in her eyes, and her small chin trembled ever so slightly. Her lips parted.

"But you were right—you've always been right. And, oh my darling, I'm so very glad!"

She kissed him full on the lips then. And Vaughan held her, held her, while her hot tears washed away both their wounds in the final absolution of her love.

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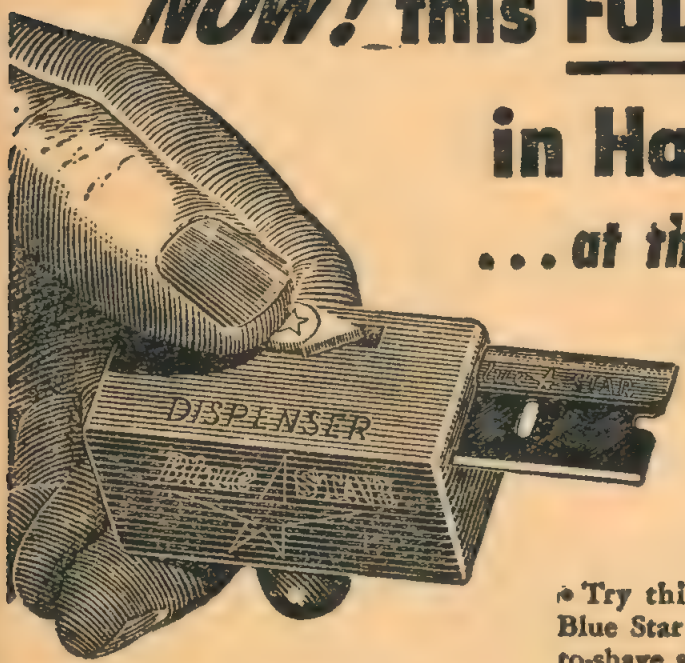

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"You shoot my dog, and I'll kill you, Gibbs!"

Raised the Right Way

By DUPREE POE

A vengeful sheepherder tries to return evil for good!

JOE ADAMS stepped down from his wagon at the nester's cabin. A warm smile brightened his wrinkled face and his mild blue eyes sparkled. He had heard Luke Gibbs was a sour-natured, cantankerous man, but Joe expected no trouble from a neighbor he aimed to help.

Duke and Shep, the two dogs, started a commotion. They streaked from the wagon, barking furiously, and headed toward a brindle hound that rose from the shade of the willows on the south bank of Cottonwood Creek.

"Come back here, you dad-blamed fools!" Joe ordered, chuckling. "The way you're showing off, folks will think you wasn't raised right!"

Joe's dogs skidded to a stop in their tracks near the cabin. For the biggest black dog Joe had ever seen, lunged toward them. That black dog was as

silent and ferocious as a panther. He leaped straight at Duke. Duke's red body almost did a back-flip, getting away from those snapping fangs.

The black dog's leap carried him to the end of a chain that was anchored to a stake in the yard and fastened to a spiked collar around his neck. The chain jerked him back with a sickening thud. He fought the chain, lunging at the two strange dogs. Not a sound came from his throat, but his fangs were bared in a vicious snarl. Hackles lifted. His eyes were bloodshot pools of fury.

Joe recognized a killer. "Come back here, Duke—you, Shep!"

Obediently, his dogs withdrew and went under the wagon. They crouched there on their bellies, ready to fight if necessary. The big brindle hound came slinking across the yard, belly low to the ground like a timber wolf. His lips snarled back over vicious fangs. There at the stake, his black companion tugged at the chain. Joe blocked the brindle hound's stalking progress. He stood squarely in front of the dog. The hound crouched to a stop, growling.

"Get back there where you belong, old son! My dogs don't aim to fight!"

From the cabin came a tall, lanky man in patched blue pants and faded shirt. In one hand, he carried a Winchester. The brindle hound retreated toward the man. He kicked the dog aside, advanced on Joe with measured stride, as silent as the big black dog still fighting the chain.

THE man's lean face seemed worked into a rage, with ridged cheeks flaming crimson. He gave Joe a piercing look from eyes that smoldered in sunken sockets. Joe Adams could almost feel the hostility and hatred behind those eyes, but Joe never lost his smile. He sensed that Luke Gibbs had a heart filled with venom, a vicious nature and an irritable disposition.

"You got a lot of nerve comin' around my place, Joe Adams!" Luke Gibbs said in a tone that snapped like a whiplash. "You been tellin' folks my dogs are sheep killers. You got it to where I'm scared to unchain Black Devil and let him run loose, on account of som'buddy might take a shot at him." He glowered at the dogs under the wagon. "I reckon you done it because you're scared folks might find out for sure which dogs have been killin' sheep around these parts. I don't see you chainin' up them killers of your'n!"

Joe lost his smile. Blood drained from his cheeks. No man had a right to so bluntly insinuate that Duke and Shep were killers. Why, those two dogs had been raised right. They wouldn't harm livestock!

"I didn't say nothin' about your dogs to nobody," Joe protested. "Except that they was mighty vicious and mean. It's many a time I've drove past your place on the wagon road and had them two devils run out and try to kill my dogs. All I've ever said to anybody was that us folks around here ought to chain up bad dogs." Joe's blue eyes hardened slightly. "Good dogs don't need chaining, Gibbs. They behave theirselves."

"Pete Carlson lost ten of his best breeders and come snortin' and whoopin' around over here, point-blank accusin' my dogs!" snarled Luke Gibbs. "Nobody would of knowed I even owned dogs, except for you complainin' around about Black Devil and ol' Tige barking a little when you go past my place."

There had been quite a lot of fuss raised lately, with some folks losing sheep. Joe might have pointed out to Gibbs that nobody had lost any sheep since Black Devil had been chained. There was no need, though, riling a man like Gibbs. Joe's smile returned bright and full. He began stripping the canvas cover from something that bulged in the wagon bed. Gibbs watched him suspiciously.

"Shucks, Gibbs, there ain't no need us neighbors fussin'," Joe said.

"You get off my place and stay off, Adams!" Gibbs retorted hotly.

It looked as though Gibbs intended to push a scrap Joe's way, but the little man just grinned. He removed the canvas cover.

"There's mutton a-plenty here in the sheep country," Joe said, "but a man gets mighty hungry for some good, fresh beef. Always when I butcher a steer, I like to load some hunks in the wagon and visit my neighbors."

He saw some of the hostility disappear from Gibbs' face. The lanky man softened slightly and his lips drew back in a sort of bitter grin, exposing yellow teeth when he saw the portions of good prime beef there in the wagon on a clean white sheet. He accepted a twenty-

pound chunk of the meat from Joe, without even grunting thanks.

"You'll be able to cut yourself some fine steak from that rump," Joe drawled, appearing not to notice anything wrong. "Or you can roast it all in one hunk and it'll go good in its own gravy."

LUKE GIBBS stood ramrod stiff and silent. Joe began throwing scraps of meat to the nester's dogs. Duke and Shep came from under the wagon, wagged tails and whined.

"You boys hongry, too?" Joe asked, pitching them some bones.

The nester's brindle hound gulped down his portion of scrap and advanced stiff-leggedly toward where Duke was gnawing a bone between forepaws. Duke looked up, growled a warning. A sudden, evil gleam flicked Luke Gibbs' black eyes.

Joe warned his dog, "Duke, you stop that fussin' with that brindle hound! If he wants that old bone, you let him have it!"

"It just goes to prove my point that them dogs of your'n have been tryin' to start a fight with Black Devil and Tige all along," Gibbs said, his thin lips twisting. "That ain't the way you told it to folks, but that's the way it is, Adams. Now, we're goin' to give that Duke dog of your'n a chance to show how bad he is."

Joe looked startled. The rifle came up in Gibbs' hands. He held the portion of beef under one arm, slanted the gun at Joe Adams. A twinkle of devilish enjoyment flicked his eyes.

"You aimin' to start a dog fight, Gibbs?" Joe looked at the rifle and his lips set tight. "I don't want old Duke all chawed up by that hound!"

"Get him, Tige!" Gibbs suddenly snapped. "You stand hitched, Adams!"

The brindle hound leaped straight at Duke. Duke came to his feet to meet that hurtling body. Fangs snapped close to his throat. Tige knocked him back, struck the ground and whipped around with fiendish swiftness.

Luke Gibbs chuckled gleefully. "I reckon you'll have a dead dog on your hands in a hurry, Adams," he decided softly. "There ain't a dog alive can whip Tige, unless it's Black Devil over there on that chain."

Joe looked at the rifle that held him helpless. He let his glance freeze on those tangled, snarling bodies that rolled and tumbled across the yard. Ordinarily, he was mild-natured and mighty peaceful, but when a man prodded him too far, Joe Adams always felt hot anger boil up, pounding at his temples.

"Ol' Duke will take care of hisself, Gibbs," he said in almost a whisper. "Jest remember, it was you started that dog fight—not me or my dog."

Duke came to his feet, untangling himself from that threshing fight. One ear was ripped. Blood made a patch against his left shoulder. The other dog's fangs had ripped a streak down Duke's nose, but he wasn't beaten.

Tige dropped low for a spring. Duke stood his ground, met the charge when it came. His jaws locked on Tige's left foreleg. Bone snapped. With a toss of his head, Duke flung the dog over on his back. Duke's fangs snapped down on that unprotected throat. The brindle dog threshed, kicked and twisted, doing his best to break that death grip that was slowly sapping his strength.

Over at the stake, the black dog went wild with fury, fighting the chain. A terrific oath spilled from Luke Gibbs' thin lips. He lifted the rifle, tried to get a bead on Duke. The hammer clicked back, but the man held his fire, afraid he might hit his own dog.

Joe bellowed out a challenge. "You shoot my dog, and I'll kill you, Gibbs!" He lurched at the lanky man, knocked him sprawling.

The rifle exploded, but the bullet sang away across the flats. Gibbs went down, clinging to the gun. Joe stood over him, fists balled, blue eyes chilled.

"Duke, you let that hound loose!" Joe bellowed. "Don't you kill that pore fool dog!" He glowered down at Gibbs. "You'd ought to be 'shamed of yourself, makin' them pore dumb critters fight like that!" he admonished.

Gibbs came up on his hunkers, leveling the rifle at Joe Adams. A snarl of hatred twisted his thin lips. He uttered a frightful oath.

"Blast you, I'll show you how to drive up to my place and start trouble with me'n my dogs!" Gibbs threatened. "I aim to shoot you through the heart and claim I was defendin' myself and my home when I done it. There won't be a witness to prove no different!"

In a daze, Joe looked at that hate-filled face behind the rifle. For a mo-

ment, he felt death reach for him. He froze in his tracks, unable to speak.

Then, a red form launched itself up from the ground, snarling. The beaten hound limped away when Duke released him. One foreleg dragged.

DUKE sprang straight at the lanky man's throat. Luke Gibbs dropped the rifle, clawed at the dog. Fangs clamped down on his throat. Those fangs might have ripped the life from Gibbs, but Duke was a dog that had been raised the right way, Joe Adams reckoned.

Duke wouldn't kill livestock of any kind. He surely wouldn't kill a man. He just held the pressure on that throat, growled softly. His yellow eyes rolled up to take a look at Joe. Whenever the helpless man twisted or squirmed, those steel-trap jaws tightened slightly.

"Easy, old boy," Joe warned. "Jest hold him until I get that rifle."

He got the gun, stood over dog and man. A word from him might have made Duke a killer. He thought of how easy it would be for him to go into court and be cleared of all charges.

Maybe he might be justified in murdering a man like Gibbs, for Gibbs would have shown him no mercy. Joe knew the lanky man would not soon forget his humiliation. Gibbs would fret and simmer, until he thought out some diabolical means of retaliation, for Gibbs was a vengeful, vicious man. For a moment, Joe hesitated.

"Turn him loose, Duke," he finally ordered. "You ain't no killer, boy."

Luke Gibbs got to his feet in a hurry, rubbing his throat with a clawlike hand. For a moment, he was speechles. Terror still flicked those small black eyes in their sunken sockets. Then, hatred again lashed out at Joe Adams like lightning from behind thunder clouds.

"I'll get even somehow—if it takes me to my dyin' day!" Gibbs snarled. "I'll kill that red hound of your'n, and maybe shoot you, too!"

Then, he saw the rifle in Joe's hands. He choked back his wrath, backed toward the cabin. He stumbled over the chunk of meat Joe had given him.

"You'd best take that in the house and wash it off," Joe said mildly, "and forget all about gettin' even with me, Gibbs. I ain't no man to pick a fuss with a neighbor, but I sure aim to take care of myself and my dogs if you start somethin'." He spoke in a soft, low tone.

Gibbs kicked viciously at the meat on the ground. He walked over to the big, black dog, snapped the chain from that spiked collar. Black Devil's jaws snapped at the man's hand. Gibbs kicked the dog viciously. He straddled the dog, holding with both hands to that spiked collar.

"Now, get off my place, or I'll turn him loose on you!" he ordered.

Joe Adams calmly unloaded the rifle, placed it on the ground. He didn't aim to be shot in the back while leaving the place. Now, he climbed into his wagon, gave Gibbs a solemn, cool look.

With whip in hand, Joe spoke. "There'll be no more trouble between us, Gibbs—unless you start it. I'll never set foot on your place again, or even drive past your place on the wagon road. I'll take a detour to keep from havin' trouble, and so will my dogs." Joe wasn't scared, but he saw instantly that the other man had accepted his remark as a sign of weakness. His cheeks flamed hot and he clucked to the horses. "Giddap," he said.

Behind him, as the wagon moved toward the big road, Joe heard Gibbs cussing furiously. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the lanky man had loosed Black Devil. Gibbs shook his fist at Joe and bellowed an insult. He stood in the yard, reloading the rifle.

Black Devil streaked toward the wagon road, after the wagon. Joe shuddered slightly. A dog that size could be a menace to an entire community. There was no danger from him now, for the dog pulled up at the road, stood there, snarling. But he was large enough to whip any dog his size and mean enough to kill a man.

"I wonder if Gibbs intends to let him run loose now?" Joe mused.

Luke Gibbs was evidently a man who was filled with untapped venom. He might go to any extreme to get even against a neighbor who had riled him. Joe worried over that thought for the rest of the day. He went to sleep that night, wondering what Luke Gibbs might do to retaliate.

NEXT day, just before noon, he hitched up the horses and headed

for town. The dogs ran out ahead of the wagon, as usual. Joe took a detour road before he reached the Gibbs place. He called to his dogs, ordered them to take that route. For a moment, they stood there, starting toward the nester's cabin. Then, they trotted off obediently over the rutted trail.

The detour road paralleled the main highway, but it missed the Gibbs place by almost a quarter of a mile. Joe looked across the lush green pasture in which some of Hiram Crow's breeder sheep grazed. He saw Luke Gibbs standing in his front yard, looking up the wagon road expectantly. Gibbs was there, waiting to start trouble, Joe reckoned. He usually went to town every morning, passed the Gibbs place about this time of day.

The nester had his rifle, and there beside him sat Black Devil, waiting. Joe was downright glad he had taken the detour.

"It kind of riles me to let him think I'm scared like this," Joe told himself, "but I reckon it's best this way. There won't be no trouble, anyhow."

Up ahead, Shep went snooping into roadside brush, sniffing along the ground. He jumped a rabbit. The rabbit streaked across the sheep pasture, headed toward the Gibbs place. Joe called to the dog, but the wind was against him. Shep lifted his voice joyously, stretched out on the rabbit's heels. Over at the Gibbs place, a rifle cracked suddenly.

Shep took several strides, carried on by pure momentum. Then, the dog turned completely over, rear feet thrashing when he struck the ground. Sheep stopped grazing. Frightened, they headed to the far side of the meadow.

Duke lifted his head, looked over the roadside brush and saw Shep sprawled there in the field. A low growl came from him. Joe called to the dog, ordering him back to the wagon. Then, Joe bounded from the wagon, plowed through brush and moved swiftly toward the fallen dog.

He was almost sobbing when he reached the dog. He saw blood on that white and brown head. For a moment, he believed Shep was dead. Then, the dog lifted his head, whined softly. Joe went down on his knees, examining an ugly gash plowed by the rifle bullet across the dog's left cheek. The wound was not serious, but it might have been. Joe lifted the dog in his arms, turned to face Luke Gibbs, who stood in his yard, watching, a thousand yards away. The rifle in Gibbs' hands leveled for another shot.

Black Devil stood beside his master. Joe could almost hear that giant beast snarling in his imagination. Duke came trotting across the field to investigate the shooting. Gibbs aimed the rifle at the dog.

"Go back, Duke!" Joe bellowed, frantic. "He aims to shoot you, sure!"

Duke hesitated. The rifle cracked, but that bullet missed its mark. Duke turned promptly, headed toward the wagon.

"I wish I'd brung a gun along!" Joe wailed, tears of wrath and anguish filling his blue eyes. "I'd give a lot for a shot at Gibbs!"

Gibbs shook a fist at him, thundered out a challenge that was caught up by the wind and hurled at Joe. "Take a wider detour next time you go to town!" Gibbs ordered. "I don't aim to have a skunk like you even comin' close to my place!"

It was mighty hard for Joe Adams to ignore that threat, but he realized he was unarmed, and that Gibbs wanted to rile him to the point of recklessness. Gibbs might shoot him if he headed toward his place.

Joe Adams didn't say a word. He turned, with Shep in his arms, toward his wagon. He wondered how a man like Gibbs hoped to get away with such high-handed brutality in a county that had a good sheriff and plenty of law-enforcement. At the wagon, he looked across at the nester and it seemed to him that Gibbs wasn't a bit worried about what the law might do to him. For Gibbs still stood there, with the rifle cradled in one arm, as though that gun represented all the law that he recognized.

Joe dressed Shep's wound and bound it with strips from a flour sack he had on the wagon seat. The dog would be all right, but that was mighty fortunate. Gibbs sure had tried to kill him!

Duke stood near the wagon, growling softly. He looked across the pasture at that big Black Devil dog. His fangs were bared and his hackles lifted.

"You stop that fussin' with that critter, Duke," Joe commanded. "I know exactly how you feel, but there's a better

way than gettin' ourselves killed to handle a thing like this. You just wait until Sheriff Bill Duncan hears what we've got to tell him!"

Joe was firm in his conviction that the sheriff was a just man. No favor ever went to a lawless man in Fargo County.

He pulled into Sage City, with Shep riding on the seat beside him. Blood had oozed through the bandage on the dog's head. Joe Adams was mildly surprised when folks along the boardwalk paused to look at him when he hitched his team in the center of the sandy street that slashed between two rows of wooden buildings. He sensed an atmosphere of hostility directed at him. Joe had known those people for years and been right good friends with all of them.

He frowned slightly, sensing that something was wrong.

Then, he saw Sheriff Bill Duncan bearing down on him. The big lawman's guns slapped in holsters at his thighs. His heavy-jowled face scowled angrily under a broad-brimmed hat. He charged down on Joe like an enraged bull in a branding pen. Shep came off the wagon seat, stood beside Duke.

FOLLOWING the sheriff came a group of angry sheepmen. They surrounded Joe and his dogs. They looked at that bloody bandage on Shep's head.

"Looks like somebody got a shot at this killer," the sheriff said.

Joe tensed, ready to defend his dog. "Shep ain't no killer!" he declared, meeting the sheriff's accusing blue eyes without flinching.

"The blazes he ain't!" Ted Minx, a sheepman, cut in sharply. "Both them dogs of your'n have been condemned, Joe. We've got the evidence."

Joe gasped. "What evidence, boys!" He looked from one hostile face to the next. "Why, my dogs ain't done nobody no harm. None at all!"

"We know now it's your dogs been killin' sheep," explained Sheriff Bill gruffly. "We've got us a witness to prove it, Joe. We was figurin' on riding out to your place to shoot them dogs this afternoon. But we figured we'd wait for Luke Gibbs to come into town and make his complaint in formal writing."

"Luke Gibbs—!" said Joe almost breathlessly. He was silenced for a moment by the shock of realizing that in some manner Luke Gibbs had talked folks into believing his dogs were sheep killers. Now, he understood why Gibbs had been so unafraid to shoot Shep. The nester had the law on his side. Gibbs had told people some sort of bold-faced lie, condemned Shep and Duke! Joe just stood there, trembling.

"Luke said he'd be here this mornin'," the sheriff said softly. "We won't kill your dogs until he gets here, Joe. I reckon that'll be the fair way to do it." There was a note of grim finality in his tone.

A man who owned a killer dog in the sheep country had no defense against his neighbors, Joe knew. His dogs were not sheep killers, but he would have to prove it, somehow. He faced the big lawman and those other men.

"I demand fairness," he told them. "Fairness, understand!"

"You'll get something you don't demand, if you stand up for these sheep killin' dogs of your'n!" thundered big Sam Brennan, a sheepman. His round face glowed red and his gray eyes chilled. "Luke Gibbs seen them dogs of yours leaving my pasture last night, all bloody and dripping with the gore from ten of my critters. I aim to shoot them dogs, Joe Aadms!"

Joe shook his head, returned the big man's glare. "You might shoot 'em, but it'll be over my dead body, Sam. I'm a peaceful man, but I don't aim to let nobody shoot my dogs! Luke Gibbs has told you a passel of lies!"

Sam Brennan dropped a hand to gunbutt in an ominous gesture.

"You look at my dogs and see if you find any blood on them," Joe offered.

The big sheepman shook his head grimly. "Wouldn't do no good. A smart sheep-killin' dog has sense enough to clean hisself by swimming creeks and slicking his hair down with his tongue, before he comes home from a raid. I've even heard of killer dogs that fooled their owners for years. Anyhow, you've got to admit them dogs of your'n run all over the country every night. I've seen 'em myself miles from your place."

Joe swallowed hard. "Sure, they run around—usually out huntin' rabbits. But that don't mean they kill sheep, does it!"

"There's a witness who seen the blood on 'em!" Sam Brennan declared.

Joe Adams looked around wildly. He saw nothing but the grimness of those

merciless faces of men who had been his friends. Not a one of them would step forward to defend a dog accused of killing sheep.

A gleam of hope surged through Joe when he glanced frantically up the sandy street and saw Luke Gibbs riding into town, Black Devil trotting behind the rawboned gelding. "Wait, Sam—let me face Lube Gibbs and choke the ugly lies down his throat!" Joe pleaded. "I'll prove to you he told lies on my dogs. Just you wait!"

EVIDENTLY Luke heard that remark. He swung down from saddle. He seemed to be gloating a little over Joe's misfortune, as he glanced at the bloody bandage on Shep's head.

"Looks like I missed that one," he drawled, "but I reckon you boys won't miss. It's mighty lucky we learned about these sheep-killin' dogs in time!"

"You're a blamed liar, Gibbs!" Joe shouted in a fine rage now. "There wasn't no sheep killin' during the weeks you kept Black Devil chained up. Then, you let that black dog run loose last night, knowing he'd kill som'buddy's livestock. You had that lie all thought out to tell folks about seein' my dogs all bloody in Sam's pasture! You're doin' this to get yourself revenged against me!"

Joe hurled himself at the lanky man. Luke Gibbs met that rush with a balled fist that lashed out furiously, peeling bark from Joe's left cheek. Joe butted with his head, knocked the other man back on his hunkers. Gibbs clawed for holster, came up with a .45 in a talonlike grasp. The big lawman kicked the gun from Gibbs' hand, thundered out orders.

"Fightin' ain't going to save your sheep-killing dogs, Joe," he warned.

"I've got a way to prove that Luke Gibbs lied!" Joe declared. "A smart sheep-killin' dog can wash hisself in creeks and slick his hair down and look plumb innocent, like Sam said. But there ain't no sheep-killin' dog can pick his own teeth!"

To prove his point, he opened Shep's mouth, let men look. Then, he opened Duke's mouth, said: "You gents see anything of wool stuck between the teeth of my dogs, boys?" he asked. Then he answered his own question, "Nope, you didn't. And there ain't no dog can kill a sheep, without gettin' some wool in his teeth. Now, we'll take a look in the mouth of Black Devil."

A scream of protest came from Luke Gibbs, but several of the men unexpectedly grabbed Black Devil, opened the dog's mouth. Stuck between those killer fangs, they found the evidence—wool, for no dog could pick his own teeth!

Luke Gibbs suddenly snatched his gun from Sheriff Bill's hand, leveled the weapon at Joe Adams. Joe spoke a soft word to Duke. A red body leaped straight at Gibbs' throat. Then, Gibbs was on the ground, with Duke holding him there, ready to sink his fanks into Gibbs' throat if Joe commanded.

"See there, gents," Joe said mildly, "my dogs ain't killers. They've been raised right." Men nodded and he reckoned he'd proven his point. He grinned.

A holocaust of flame and fury sears the rangeland when the cowboy known as "Drifting Snow" drifts back to Sun Dog Valley ready for a showdown to avenge his slain father—in RIFLE BAIT, the thunder-packed short novel by W. C. TUTTLE coming in our next issue—*plus* many other smashing yarns!

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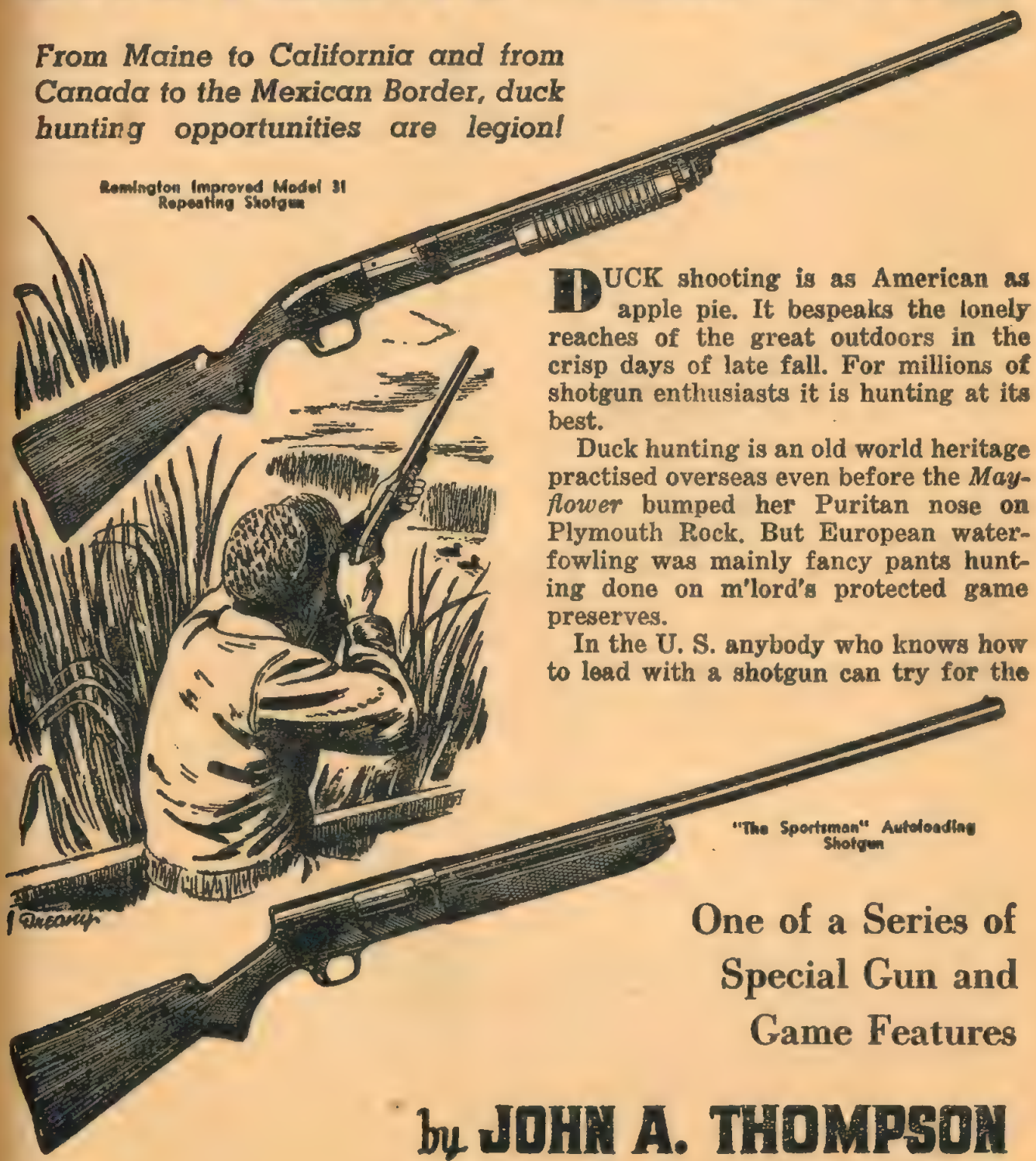

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Nowhere else in the world is duck shooting as universal a sport as it is within the boundaries of the U.S.A. Nor are there as many duck hunters. We number them in the millions annually, if the sale of duck stamps is any criterion. And it should be. You can't legally hunt ducks without one.

High Skill Is Needed

Duck hunting involves shooting that calls for close gun pointing and a high degree of hunting skill in bringing the quarry within shooting range. The wild duck is a wary bird.

Connecting with a redhead on the wing or with any other duck for that matter, resolves itself into the mathematical problem of bringing one moving object, your gun, into a position where the shot pellets it ejects will intercept another moving object—the duck, at a predetermined point in space. The point must, of course, be within the shooting range of the shotgun and the ammunition you are using.

This involves a nicety of calculation that becomes fairly automatic with the expert. But it takes practise for the beginner to have shot pattern and scramming duck meet at the same place.

Both the man with some duck shooting behind him and the tyro can improve their bag by a better understanding of what picking out that hoped-for collision point actually means.

Let's start off this way. For every duck folded up at 60 yards or better, hundreds are dropped at a range of between 40 and 50 yards. The average duck hunter can generally consider about 45 yards as the effective shooting range, both for himself and the gun and ammunition he is most likely to be using.

Ducks on the wing really get up and go. They may hit 60 miles an hour. That's 88 feet per second. Reduced to shooting range figures it means that the duck you are trying to hit covers about 30 yards in 1 second, and 50 yards in 1½ seconds or slightly over.

All of which doesn't give a hunter much time to dawdle over his lead or make up his mind just when to pull the trigger. One thing is certain. In duck hunting he who hesitates a split second too long has lost—a duck.

Six feet too late—2 yards—represents only a fraction of a second's travel at a duck's normal flying speed. But it is enough for a nice clean, but exasperating miss. Not even a tail feather jerked loose.

If you want to argue the point, we will agree that ducks don't always fly at 60 miles an hour. We'll even admit some never hit that speed and do some similar figuring on a table-luscious, wild rice-fattened slow freight mallard. Say he ambles along at between 40 and 45 miles an hour. That's somewhere between 60 and 70 feet per second or 30 yards in 1½ seconds, perhaps a trifle less and 50 yards in 2 seconds plus a small fraction.

Sure, it gives you more time. But not much. Somewhere between one-third and one-half a second more.

So far we have been talking about the duck. What about the hunter?

Scientific long-hairs who have conducted carefully timed personal efficiency tests have come to the conclusion that it takes most of us humans approximately one-fifth of a second to do most of the things we try to do in a hell-for-leather hurry. Our brain reactions are not "instantaneous" as we are apt to think they are.

Make Advance Preparations

In duck shooting the moment he has a chance at a duck, it is up to the hunter to get his gun sighted along the duck's line of flight, swing it out to the proper lead and decide to release the trigger at what he hopes is the proper instant to bring duck and shot pellets together in violent collision. At one-fifth of a second for each of these separate things the hunter has to relay his brain to do that means the better part of a second is consumed while Mister Duck is winging off into the wild blue yonder towards the limit of average shotgun range.

Moreover the shotgun you are so proud of, excellent as it is, is no electronic ray gun. Even the best of standard shot shell loads require a certain amount of time to cover the distance between you and the duck.

With distance the lead pellets lose their velocity fast. They may, and do travel the first 30 yards in almost nothing flat. Say one-tenth of a second. But it takes them close to one-fifth of a second to reach a point 50 yards from the muzzle of the shotgun from which they were fired.

Remember? That little dot in time, one-fifth of a second, is sufficient to move a flying duck anywhere from 12 to 15 feet—4 to 5 yards—ahead of where you expected him to be when you pulled the trigger.

If you are whoofing ducks consistently and don't know why, try lengthening your lead. The majority of duck misses come from shots that cut through *behind* the flying target.

Knowledge of the actual timetable figures and factors involved aside from helping your shooting, should make it a lead-pipe cinch to appreciate how much truth there is in the often-quoted statement: "Correct lead is not easy." Aiming a shotgun at a point where the duck isn't, but where you hope he'll be by the time the shell load gets there is something that takes good eyes, good nerves, quick figuring—and a lot of practise.

But it can be learned. Once you have captured the knack and duck after duck comes tumbling down to the crack of your favorite scattergun, you can credit yourself with a real game hunting achievement. You're in. Automatically you become a member of the great brotherhood of duck hunters—with full authority to say your say wherever sportsmen gather and to compare gun, gauges, chokes and shell loads with the rest of them.

A few "natural-born" duck hunters seem to lead correctly virtually by instinct. The way grandma used to bake a cake without recipe yet it always came out exactly right in taste and texture. But by far the majority of successful duck droppers use one of two systems in leading—the steady lead or the overtaking swing.

Both systems work, with the choice largely a matter of personal preference and the type of lead a man becomes accustomed to. Of the two the overtaking swing is perhaps a shade the favorite.

In the overtaking swing the hunter snaps his gun to his shoulder the moment he has a chance at a winging duck, starts his aim with the muzzle behind the bird but directly on the bird's line of flight. Continuing the swing, and it had better be fast, he brings his gun muzzle up to and past the bird, and pulls the trigger when he believes his aim is the right distance ahead of Mister Duck. It should be a fairly short lead in this type of shooting, roughly 2 yards or under.

Follow Through With Swing

And it is important for the hunter NOT to stop his swing when he turns the trigger loose.

The follow-through is a must. The duck doesn't stop the instant you are set to pull the trigger. He is moving all the time. It is up to the hunter to keep his gun moving with the bird at which it is pointed.

Thousands of ducks have been bagged by the overtaking swing system, a method incidentally that also holds good for bringing down running game with a rifle. The system is somewhat faster than the steady lead, particularly if you

are using a fairly light gun that balances well and one which you are experienced in handling.

There is another big advantage to the overtaking swing. Coming up from behind, picking up and then passing the bird keeps your gun muzzle moving directly along the duck's line of flight. It automatically takes care of any up or down angling Mister Duck may be indulging in and thus prevents a lot of over and under misses from shots that otherwise have the correct lead.

In steady lead shooting the hunter figures where a duck will cross at about right angles to his gun and what lead will drop him. The estimate in this case is usually about 3 yards—say between 8 and 10 feet. The hunter then picks up this lead and keeps the gun muzzle that far ahead of the bird by swinging it with the duck's flight.

When he feels he has his target all set—Whammo! And down comes another duck.

This is apt to be slower shooting than the overtaking swing. But experts generally agree it is more accurate. With the steady lead as with the overtaking swing the shotgun muzzle must be kept moving at the time the trigger is released.

Follow either methods faithfully and it will improve your duck score.

Snap Shooting Is Unreliable

Snap shooting at ducks, that is just bringing your gun up, pointing it at a spot where you hope the duck will fly into the shell load and jerking the trigger is fast. No argument there. It will do in a pinch. And it may bring down a duck. But it is a comparatively unreliable method of duck shooting.

What gun to use on ducks? Okay, but you know the old saying, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

To start with, shotguns are perhaps the most widely used sporting guns in the country. Waterfowl, game birds, small animals such as rabbits and when suitably loaded with slugs or buckshot, even deer are hunted with shotguns. And shotguns themselves come in all manner of styles, makes, models, finishes and prices.

There are, for instance, autoloaders, sometimes mistakenly called automatic shotguns, which they are not. An automatic firearm is one that gives a steady burst of bullets on holding down the trigger, like a machine-gun. Autoloading shotguns do automatically eject the empty fired shell and feed a new shell from the magazine into the chamber when the action closes. But that's all. The new shells can only be fired by pulling the trigger each time, not by hanging onto it.

Autoloaders are excellent modern shotguns. So are repeating shotguns, generally known as pump or slide action. These slide guns have a manually operated fore-end by means of which the empty shell is ejected and fresh one moved into the chamber.

There are also single-barrel bolt action shotguns and "break-open" shotguns—guns that break open at the barrel. "Break-opens" may be single barrel, double barrel or have over and under barrels.

Fine guns in all or most of these styles are regularly made by such standard sporting arms manufacturers as Remington, Winchester, Fox, Browning, Savage, Stevens, Ithaca, Marlin, Mossberg, Iver-Johnson and others.

Duck hunters are a varied breed. They generally have very definite ideas concerning what is the best gun for duck shooting. The ideas are likely to vary enough to be confusing to the tyro. Confusing that is unless the tyro realizes that the free advice dispensers are each boosting the particular gun that individual has found best for his own use according to his temperament and the type of duck hunting he most often indulges in. Maybe it's just the gun he has had the best luck with.

Some duck hunters prefer a heavy gun, say around 8 lbs., and one with a long 30 or 32-inch barrel. That's okay. They like 'em. And they are, in fact, perfectly all right where duck hunting is done from a long, cold sit in a duck blind. You don't have to lug the thing

around much. And though, contrary to popular opinion, the shooting qualities of a shotgun are not controlled by the length of the barrel, a long barrel does provide a longer sighting line and may usually be held a little more steadily.

Other duck hunters look on those 8 lb. cannons as if they were one of the original Pilgrim Fathers' blunderbusses—and in about the same class. Lighter guns with shorter barrels they contend truthfully are faster to handle and a lot easier to cart around. That is if you should happen to want to use them on upland game birds, grouse, quail and so forth.

These fellows also are usually quick to point out that, as far as the short barrel goes, modern shot charges attain their maximum acceleration within 26 inches of barrel length. So why the extra pipe?

A Way To Alienate Friends

You can make a lifelong enemy out of your best friend by correcting him on his duck gun, especially if he has shot a couple of ducks with it. But the long and short of it is that both the heavy type and the lighter type shotguns are prime duck guns within their range and power.

The heavy, larger gauge gun carrying more shot will drop a duck at greater distances. Yet a faster-to-handle lighter gauge gun is likely to get you just about as many birds because it can fold them up more readily within a closer range.

You can rhubarb it back and forth ad infinitum—that's fancy lingo for till the cows come home. But for anybody who is still in doubt, don't toss a coin. Use the type of shotgun that suits you best, or with which you are most familiar. That's the gun you'll get the most ducks with.

Although a 12-gauge is usually considered the standard shotgun gauge for ducks the trend seems to be towards the lighter 16 for general duck hunting. Forty-five yards or anything over is a long reach for the 16, but ducks under that will come down nicely.

A lot of stove league word tussles center around shot size—the best shot size for ducks. Stick to No. 6 shot and you will be right as far as the average duck trip goes. The No. 4 shot boys, whether they say so or not, are talking about long range duck shooting. In that branch the No. 4's have the edge on 6's. And the fellow who insists on little No. 7½ pellets really means using them for close range gunning directly over a string of decoys. Or at least he should.

So far as shotgun choke is concerned for all around usefulness—including most duck hunting—the most practical is the modified choke. It will pattern about 60% of the shot into a 30-inch circle at 40 yards, on the average. With that kind of a start the rest of the business of connecting with a duck is squarely the hunter's responsibility.

In case anyone should try to snarl you up with some authoritative sounding stuff concerning the relation of choke to the speed of travel of the shell load, hear him out. Then let out your chest and floor him with this. It is a quote on the subject from a fellow who knows—Henry P. Davis, gun expert of the Remington Arms Company, Inc., up in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

An Expert Discusses Chokes

Explains Mr. Davis: "There *is* a velocity difference in loads fired through shotgun barrels of different choke. . . . Tests conducted at the Burnside Laboratory of the Du Pont Company some years ago indicated that there is approximately a one-foot per second difference in velocity per thousandth of an inch of choke. Between a cylinder bore (almost no choke) and a full choke gun there would be a maximum difference of 30 to 40 feet per second in the average velocity over a 40-yard range. The full choke gun is the faster. . . ."

Now comes the kicker:

"For the average load this velocity difference corresponds to a difference in time of flight to a 40-yard distant target of about 0.006 seconds. Though real, such a difference can have little or no practical importance."

There it is. Six thousandths of a second! That's quicker than the wink of a gnat's eye. If you are missing ducks you'd better think up a better alibi than the slowdown caused by the choke in your scattergun.

Whether you are shooting California's great Tule Lake region, the prairie sloughs of the Dakotas, Texas potholes, the salt water marshes that line the coast of the Carolinas, river hunting Silver creek near Sun Valley, or blasting at sea ducks off the rocky shore of Maine, here are some general duck tips that may help you out.

Along the coast the best concentrations of ducks are found mainly not only on the big salt marshes but also up the smaller and shallower tidewater rivers where they can get good feed.

Black duck, pintails, bluebills and teal are usually the earliest southbound migrants. The redheads, canvasbacks and mallards move in a little later as a rule.

Morning flights, from sunup to about 8 o'clock and evening flights, say from 3 or 4 o'clock on until sunset, are most productive for the hunter generally speaking, with the morning shooting having the edge over the sundown flight.

Ducks don't like stormy or windy weather. On windy days, or just before or after a storm flocks are likely to be scattered, but small bunches will be on the move all day long restlessly seeking shelter of a lee shore. This applies to stormy weather on lakes and rivers as well as along coastal waters. If you can stick it out yourself, such days usually bring good duck shooting.

Also put out fewer decoys at one place in such weather. Ducks are expecting other small bunches. A big flock would look unnatural. And by all means set the decoys in a sheltered lee side spot. If the wind shifts, shift your decoys.

Another thing about decoys. Don't expect to lure in mallards with canvasback decoys, or redheads and canvasbacks with imitation mallards. It isn't that the different ducks are necessarily unsociable. It is just that the so-called puddle ducks (like the mallard) and the diver ducks feed in different places, the puddle ducks in shallow water and the diver ducks where the water is deeper. And you can't fool a duck about its own feeding grounds.

Duck calls? Sure, if there is someone along who is an expert and your decoys are in a spot where they can't easily be seen. Or if you are on a narrow river and high bank trees make the decoys hard to spot from the sky. If no expert is handy maybe you had better forget the duck call. Some conservation authorities have declared that a poor duck caller is the best friend a lot of ducks ever had. He can veer them off to hellangone into the next county, and they never will come back.

It is easy to underestimate the range of a duck flying overhead, or over water. Hold your shots for those you *know* are in killing range. That will save a merely crippled bird that you may or may not be able to recover and put to sleep. And in spite of the excitement of the moment, you'll feel better about it when the long day's sport is done.

Now go on out and get those ducks. They are worth the effort, great hunting, and some of the best of wild game table meat to boot.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

RABBITS ARE TRICKY

Another Fact-Packed Feature by JOHN A. THOMPSON

CABIN FEVER

by TEX GAINSVILLE

Carling and Mullen struggled furiously

One of three men was the killer and payroll thief—which?

DOUG CARLING stood in the open doorway of the Wagon Wheel bunkhouse staring somberly out into the darkness. It was a very cloudy night. The heavy snows that had lingered most of the winter were gone but there was still a chill in the air. Late March now and spring seemed a long time coming this year.

"Shut the door, Carling." Rink Mullen's harsh voice rasped against Carling's nerves like the sound of a buzzsaw. "It's cold in here."

"Aw, what does he care if we freeze," Joe Woodward said bitterly. "I've had enough of this outfit. I'm quitting soon as the boss pays us off in the morning."

Carling closed the door from the inside. He stood with his back against it, young, and husky and a good cowhand. He stared at the other two men and the hate was strong in their eyes as they blazed at him. It wasn't entirely personal. There were five men in the outfit including the ranch owner. The three months during which they had been cooped up because of the bad weather, had left them with frayed nerves.

Unimportant trifles grew into reasons for one man to dislike another. It was not hard to fan that resentment into blind, unreasoning hate. The nearest town was ten miles away and the deep snow had made the roads practically impassible up to the last week or so.

Doug Carling continued to stare at the two men, and was surprised to find anger rising within him. Rink Mullen was lying on his bunk, a big man with straw colored hair and strange, expressionless dark eyes. Joe Woodward sat at a table playing solitaire with a battered deck of cards.

"It's not cold out now," Carling said, surprised to find he was making an issue of it. "At least nothing like it has been."

"Arguing, always arguing about it!" Woodward slapped down a card on top of another in the row in front of him. He was thin-faced and middle-aged. "I'm sure sick of it."

"The sound of your voice doesn't soothe me any, Joe," Mullen said. "If you're quitting why don't you leave tonight instead of in the morning?"

"Because I'm not going until I get my pay," Woodward snapped impatiently.

CARLING walked over to his bunk and sat down, glad that the two men were leaving him out of it for the time being. The anger had left him as quickly as it had come. He was tired of all the squabbling over nothing.

"Ben Nolan got back from town about an hour ago," Mullen said. "Reckon the boss must have got the payroll money from the bank. If you are so anxious to leave why don't you go up to the house and ask for your pay tonight, Woodward?"

"That's an idea." Woodward tossed aside the cards and got to his feet. "I'll go see him right now."

The door opened and closed behind Joe Woodward as he departed. Carling and Mullen were alone in the bunkhouse. Tom Baker, the ranch cook, had driven a wagon to Gunsight for supplies, and wasn't expected back before sometime in the morning. Only the three waddies and the owner of the Wagon Wheel were at the ranch tonight.

"I sure am glad this winter is over," Mullen said, as his harsh voice sounded almost friendly. "You know what's been the trouble with all of us here, Doug?"

"Sure." Carling drew out the makings, and rolled himself a cigarette. "Reckon we've all had a bad case of cabin fever."

"Right." Mullen nodded. "And if you ask me Joe Woodward has done more beefing than anyone. I'm kind of glad he is leaving. There's a hombre who is hard to get along with. Seeing as you only joined the outfit last spring, you wouldn't know as much about that as I do."

"I know enough about it," Carling said. "You get to branding or rounding up stock with Woodward and he talks so much about what a tough job it is, that you find you're doing all the work."

"He can talk a lot of work all right," Mullen said, and then he frowned and sat up on his bunk. "I hear horses coming this way. Wonder who it is?"

"Don't know." Carling rose and went to the door and opened it. Mullen joined him as they stood peering out. "Riders coming."

The pounding of the hoofbeats was loud and finally four horsemen rode into the ranch yard. Carling and Mullen stepped out in front of the bunkhouse and stood watching as the riders halted their mounts in front of the ranchhouse.

"Looks like Sheriff Ed Russell and a posse," Carling said. "Wonder who they are hunting?"

"Don't know," said Mullen. "Maybe we had better go up to the house and find out. Joe is up there with the Old Man and the sheriff will sure tell them about it. Yes, that looks like Russell who just got off his horse and went into the house."

Carling found that he was feeling strangely uneasy. There was something almost ominous about the sudden appearance of those four horsemen. He didn't want to go up to the ranchhouse and ask questions, and yet he was curious.

"Come on," Mullen said. "Let's see what happened."

They hurried up to the front of the ranchhouse. The three men with the sheriff still sat in their saddles. Carling recognized all three of them. The tall man with the mustache was Lester Parker, owner of the L Bar P ranch over east of the Wagon Wheel. The other two men were citizens of Gunsight.

The sheriff appeared in the doorway of the ranchhouse—tall and shadowy in the light of the oil lamp burning in the hall behind him.

"You better all come inside," Sheriff Russell said. "Ben Nolan is lying in there, dead. Somebody stabbed him in the back."

Doug Carling felt sick as he heard the sheriff's words. He had liked Ben Nolan a lot. The boss had been a good man to work for—and now he was dead. Carling went up the steps of the porch with Mullen following close behind him. The three men who formed the posse were swinging out of their saddles and ground-hitching their horses.

Russell turned and led the way along the hall and into the big room that Nolan used as a living room and office. Gradu-

ally the others joined the big, heavy-set lawman there.

Ben Nolan was sprawled face downward on the floor near his desk. There was a jagged tear in the back of his gray flannel shirt and blood on the cloth. The knife that had entered his back and pierced his heart was not to be seen.

"The payroll money missing?" Mullen asked as he stood with the others staring at the dead man. "He must have brought it from the bank when he came back from town this evening."

"So that's why he was killed," said the sheriff. "Haven't seen any sign of money around so far."

A THOUGHT struck Carling as he watched and listened. Where was Joe Woodward? What had happened since he had gone up to the ranchhouse so he could get his pay and leave tonight instead of in the morning.

"Woodward is missing," Mullen said, as though the same thought had occurred to him. "He was anxious to quit the outfit."

The sheriff and Lester Parker searched through the desk and through Nolan's pockets, but they found no money.

"The money is gone all right," Russell said, looking at Carling and Mullen. "But since he has only had four men working for him this winter at probably forty dollars a month, the payroll couldn't have been so big."

"He owed all of us three months pay," Carling said. "Reckon that amounted to over four hundred dollars for the four of us, so Nolan must have had that much money when he was killed."

"Four hundred dollars," Sheriff Russell said thoughtfully. "And I thought I heard you say Joe Woodward is missing."

"He is," Mullen said quickly, before Carling could speak. "He left us in the bunkhouse a little while ago and went to see the boss. Woodward aimed to quit tonight and was going to ask Ben Nolan for his pay."

"What happened?" demanded Joe Woodward as he stepped into the room. "I saw the horses outside and heard voices so I figured I better see what was wrong." One of the posse had blocked his view of the still figure on the floor. Woodward broke off with a startled gasp as he saw Nolan lying there. "The boss—and he looks like he's dead."

"He is," said the sheriff. "He was stabbed in the back and the payroll money is missing. What do you know about this, Woodward?"

"Nothing," Woodward said quickly. "I started up to see the boss. I was going to tell him I was quitting and ask him for my pay. But I got to thinking that maybe I was being kind of hasty—jobs are kind of hard to come by this time of year. So I took a long walk while I made up my mind what I was going to do."

"You expect us to believe that?" Mullen demanded impatiently. "If you ask me, I think you came up here to the house, stabbed the boss, stole the money and left. Maybe you didn't know about the sheriff and the posse coming this way, but you did know that me and Carling would suspect you if we found the boss dead and you missing."

"That might be it," Carling said quickly. "And Woodward decided to hide the money—then come back and pretend he knew nothing about the killing. I figure I know just where the money is hidden, too."

"Huh?" Mullen looked at him in surprise.

"Where is it?" demanded the sheriff.

"Can't tell you," Carling said. "I'll have to show you. If you will follow me I think I can lead you to that dinero."

He led the way out of the ranchhouse with the other men following him. Mullen and Woodward were close behind him as he headed toward the bunkhouse.

"You think the money is hidden in the bunkhouse?" Mullen asked.

"I'm not saying," snapped Carling.

"Say, I just happened to think," exclaimed Woodward. "You might have robbed and killed the boss yourself, Carling. You weren't around earlier tonight and neither was Mullen when I started

playing solitaire in the bunkhouse. That's it—you stabbed Nolan."

"You can't accuse me of doing it," Carling growled.

He suddenly swung around and hit Woodward a hard blow on the chin that knocked the thin-faced man down.

"Carling must be guilty," Mullen shouted. "I'll make him talk!"

In a moment the two men were pounding hard blows at each other. Woodward got to his feet and stood watching the fight as did the sheriff and the three men of the posse.

No one tried to stop it.

Carling was taking a lot of punishment, but he was dealing out even better than he received. He could see that Mullen was slowly weakening.

"I think you know where I'll find the money in the bunkhouse," Carling said in so low a tone that only Mullen heard him. "In the place where you hid it after you killed Nolan."

MULLEN cursed and then suddenly a knife appeared in his right hand. He lunged at Carling, trying to stab him with the ugly blade. Carling lost his balance and fell with Mullen on top of him. He got his left arm around Mullen's neck and tightened it, cutting off the other man's wind. The knife dropped out of Mullen's hand.

"All right," Sheriff Russell said, as he lunged forward and grabbed up the knife. "I think we know who killed Ben Nolan now. Let him go, Carling."

The other men pulled the two struggling rannies apart. The sheriff examined the knife that Mullen had dropped.

"Still some blood on it," Russell said. "This was the knife that killed Nolan all right."

"Hoped that if I could get in a fight with Mullen and make him mad enough he would try to use the knife on me," Carling said. "And he did. I wondered why he was so anxious to have Woodward see the boss about quitting and getting his pay tonight. It was because Mullen wanted an alibi. I don't know where he hid the money—but I reckon you can make him talk now."

Carling was right. The sheriff did make Mullen talk. He had killed and robbed his boss and hidden the money in a pocket of his saddle in the harness shed. Russell found it there.

"But what made you figure it might be Mullen in the first place?" Sheriff Russell asked Carling.

"I remembered how Mullen got right friendly after Woodward left the bunkhouse," Carling said. "Since he had been hating me all winter it sure didn't seem natural unless he had some reason for it. Then when I learned the boss had been stabbed I was sure Woodward hadn't done it."

"Why not?" demanded the sheriff.

"Shucks, Woodward would spend so much time talking about it that he never would get around to doing it," Carling said with a grin, and then his expression grew serious. "But I hate to think of Mullen having killed the boss for four hundred dollars."

"It wasn't only for the money," Mullen said. "I hated him. Look at the way he has been picking on me all winter—making me do all the hard jobs in the freezing cold."

Carling knew that Ben Nolan had not asked Mullen to do a bit more work than the rest of the men. "Cabin fever," Carling said. "Never knew it could get that bad."

"It does sometimes," said the sheriff, and the other men nodded. "Funny, we been looking for a bank robber that we were tipped off might head this way, but haven't seen a sign of him yet." Russell looked thoughtfully at Carling. "You ever considered being a deputy, Doug?"

"Not up to now," Carling said. "But it sounds interesting. Could you use one, Sheriff?"

"I sure could," said Russell. "See me in the morning and we'll talk it over." He smiled a bit grimly. "No one has time for cabin fever on that job."

"Suits me," said Carling. "I'll be there in the morning."

Read Our Companion Magazine GIANT WESTERN — the Big Quarter's Worth!

A giant grizzly bear goes berserk, and plunges into a welter of activity that raises hob with the Bumble Bee!

OLD SILVER TIP

WELL, I guess you fellows have heard a lot of bear stories. So have I. But if you want me to, I'll tell you the story of old Silver Tip. He was the biggest bear I ever saw. He weighed close to thirteen hundred pounds—and that's pretty big for a horse, let alone a bear. I'd heard some pretty wild tales about him on and off but put most of them down for bologny.

I'd been working all summer for the B.Z. (commonly known as the Bumble Bee outfit). They ran their horses and cattle up in the high mountains around Green River Lake and in the Pinyon Ridge country in Wyoming. And that was right in the midst of Old Silver Tip's stamping grounds. The ranchers got together and offered a thousand-dollar reward to the man who brought in his hide. And if everybody that said they did, hit that old bear with a rifle

A True Fact Story by **JOHN EDWARD DALTON**

ball, he must have weighed at least a ton with all that lead in his hide.

What do you say if I start at the beginning? Snag Hart and I were working together. Not as cowboys. "Bumble Bee" Dismucks hired us to discourage dishonest cow gentlemen with long lass ropes and running irons, from painting their brands on Bumble Bee cattle, also we were ordered to keep sheep men off his cattle range.

"Be polite but firm," were his orders. Snag and I needed the money so we took the job. But neither of us could see any real reason for being polite to a Mexican sheep herder, when all you have to do is to crack 'em on the hat rack with your gun and they get your meaning right off the bat. You don't even have to say a word.

One afternoon Bill Graham, the ranch boss, pulls into camp with five or six tenderfeet in tow. He turns that bunch over to us with orders to take 'em out elk hunting for a couple of weeks and to be sure they get an elk apiece.

Tenderfeet Well Equipped

Snag and I looked over their outfit. It was sure a lulu. They had everything that was ever invented to take up room on a camping trip. Sleeping bags, fancy tents, folding tables, thermos bottles and jugs, pots and pans and dishes, enough to feed Coxey's Army. And they brought their own cook. He sure was a high-toned cook. He even had his own dish washer.

They had three or four rifles apiece. They were the best that money could buy and had every kind of a fancy sight and grip. They even had a couple of flunkies to keep those guns clean and carry them. Say, they had fifteen pack horses and mules. What do you think of that? You'd ought to have seen that outfit when we started up to the top of the ridge. It looked like a big game party going into darkest Africa, and they made more noise than a brass band.

Well, we hunted all over the country for the next two weeks and finally got pretty near all the dudes their elk. I never put in such a wild time since the Spanish-American war. You never knew when one of those buzzards with his fancy gun was going to think you was an elk and let a little bunch of daylight through you.

One morning Snag took the bunch up above timber line to see if he could get the rest of the dudes their game. The ones that had got their elk were rarin' to go back to the big city, but them that hadn't, wanted to stay till they got theirs. And believe me getting a guy that makes as much noise as them birds did a shot at an elk, wasn't any snap.

One bird got excited and killed a five-hundred-dollar bull. He said he thought it was a buffalo. And a couple more took me for some kind of a wild animal and sure made me restless before I could get back of a rock. I didn't think I'd ever feel satisfied and contented again till those pilgrims and their fancy junk were safe on the train at Rock Springs.

Snag planned on camping up above timber line that night so they could be out amongst the elk by daylight. So they took their cooks and flunkies with them, and as somebody had to stay in camp, I was tickled to death to do it. The farther I could stay away from that bunch of wild-shootin' tenderfeet the better I was satisfied. I heaved a big sigh of relief when I saw the last of them go out of sight around the bend in the trail.

They'd been gone from camp about an hour when one of the cowboys came galloping back. Snag had sent him after my old thirty-thirty. A dude had got his feet tangled up and fell on his gun, smashing the telescope sight.

After he left, I took stock of the firearms left in camp and found all I had was a little twenty-two six-shooter and about a dozen shells. But that didn't worry me none for I'd lived in the open all my life.

We had our camp pitched in a little clearing with a spring in the center of it. The grass was about six inches high and the horses that hadn't been taken up to timber line, were putting that long grass out of sight. You didn't have to herd 'em; they were all old camp horses and besides we had a bell mare. It's funny how a bunch of old saddle horses will stick to an old mare with a bell on her. It snowed a little that afternoon. Just enough to make the tracking good and I was glad for it would be a big help to Snag and the dudes.

All Was Serene

It was plenty lonesome that afternoon and evening, and I was glad when bed-

time came. Everything was peaceful. The horses were feeding quietly and lying around resting when I threw the last log on the fire and went into my "tepee" tent to hit the hay.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep, but the first thing I knew I heard a thunder of hoofs and it seemed like every horse in the bunch hit the tent as he went by. Down the tent came on top of me and I had a time digging my way out from under it. But I finally did. The moon was out and it was as bright as day.

Have you ever seen the moonlight on the snow in the north? You can read by it. Well, I looked around to see what had caused all the row. And there it was up by the edge of the clearing. I knew it must be old Silver Tip, for it was the biggest bear I ever saw.

He was standing on all fours and looking over towards where we had six or eight elk hanging down from a pole between two big trees. That didn't worry me a lot, because there ain't one bear out of a hundred that will show fight if you don't get 'em in a corner.

I made up my mind if he didn't declare war, I wouldn't. He never looked at me once, but started to walk slowly over towards the elk. I hollered and cussed at him and then threw a snow ball, but he never looked my way, just kept going. So I grabbed a pine knot out of the fire and thought I'd throw it in front of him and scare him away from the meat. But that fire brand didn't light where it should. It lit right on his head. And the way he put me around that fire was nobody's business. I guess it must have burned him pretty bad, for he kept rubbing the top of his head with his paw. He chased me around that fire two or three times and then went back up to the edge of the timber and lay down but he never took his eyes off me.

I sure wished for my old thirty-thirty and I began to think that being in camp by yourself with nothing but a dinky little twenty-two pea-shooter to fight off a bear about the size of a horse, wasn't so hot. I was pretty careful to keep the fire between us. Wild animals as a rule, won't go near a fire, at least not at night. But this one didn't seem to care for any rules. He started back to that meat, swinging his head slowly back and forth.

I watched him till he got about half way. I didn't want him to get the meat, but I didn't want him to get me either, so I was kind of up a tree. I noticed a big pound can of pepper lying on the ground. We'd brought it along to rub on the meat to keep the deer flies off.

I don't know what made me pick it up and put it in my pocket, but I did. All this time Old Silver Tip was getting closer to that string of elk. So I thought I'd take another chance. I heaved another fire brand. It lit right in front of him. He stopped and grunted, turned around and walked a little ways toward me—stopped and looked at me a second. Then he started right back for the meat. So I heaved another pitch brand at him. This time it lit right on top of his back and stuck there. I could smell the burnt hair. He rolled over about twice. And here he came!

I knew the fire wouldn't stop him this time. He came right through the middle of it. So I beat it for the nearest tree. I had about an inch to spare when that bear hit the tree. I climbed it like a monkey would a flag pole. It's a good thing a Silver Tip can't climb, because if they could, I'd sure have been bear fodder that night.

Bear Tackles Tree

Old Silver Tip kept me plenty scared. He'd climb up several feet and then slide back, and once he got up to a lower limb. But he was too heavy and the limb broke off. I cussed that bear in every language I knew, which was several. My cussing reached a long way back into the past. In fact, it reached back about two generations before there was any bear. And then I went about three hundred years into the future. By that time I was fit to be tied. I was so mad that I didn't have any more sense than a Mexican sheep herder.

All of a sudden I thought of that twenty-two. So I climbed down just out of reach and threw sticks at him till he tried to climb the tree to get at me.

Then I emptied the twenty-two in his face, trying to shoot out his eyes. I got his left eye but didn't hit the other. That bear was the most terrible sight I ever saw. He'd rage over and tear down a tent and then rage back and try to tear down the tree I was in. I had two more shots left and I shot him in the face with both of them.

It takes a big rifle to kill a bear. So you see about all that twenty-two was doing was giving him a bad headache and making him madder than a loco bull. He put in the time between then and morning wrecking the camp and keeping me up that tree. Finally I thought of the pepper and the next time he rared up I poured about half of it right in his face. And say, he went right into a fit. He had his mouth open, and I guess about half a handful must have went in.

He pretty near choked to death, and rolled over and over. Finally rushed and stuck his head in the spring. I'll bet that cold water felt good to his eyes and mouth. Then he jumped right in the middle of it and sure made the water fly. When he came out of the spring, he beat it right over to the cook tent and had a five round battle with a couple sacks of flour. When he got done he looked like a polar bear. Then he spent about fifteen minutes slapping a five-gallon can of coal oil all over the place.

When I looked at that torn-up camp, I knew that the hunting trip was over. It was the most smashed up outfit I ever saw and if I hadn't been so cold up that tree, and the bear hadn't been raging around it, it would have been funny. But the way it was, there wasn't anything to laugh at. Don't let any one tell you a bear ain't smart. He'd go back up in the timber and hide and then come charging back the minute I started down.

But finally about an hour after daylight, he left for good. And the last I saw of him he was going over a hill about a mile from camp. And say, listen, the north end of that south-bound bear, was about the best looking thing I ever saw. Then I came down out of the tree and hustled something to eat out of the wreck. After I'd eaten, I started out to look for the horses. I didn't think they'd go very far. An old camp horse never does. So it wasn't long before I found the old gray. He was working his way back towards camp. I spent the rest of the day rounding up the saddle and pack stock. None of them had gone very far, but they were all broke up into little bunches and scattered all over the map.

Snag and the dudes blew in about sundown. They were pretty much surprised at the looks of the camp. Snag said he couldn't see how one bear could do all that damage in one night. He said it looked like it would take ten bears ten days to do that much damage.

Start For Railroad

They camped the best they could that night and the next morning packed what was left of their outfit, which was mighty little, and beat it for the railroad. I didn't go with them. I had a little score to settle with the big Silver Tip. So I borrowed a rifle and ammunition for it, took the old gray and one pack horse and sent word to Bumble Bee that I'd see him when I got that bear and I wasn't coming down till I did, if I had to stay up in those mountains till I was six months older than Rip Van Winkle.

Old Silver Tip's trail wasn't very hard to follow. He didn't turn aside for nothing. The path he left looked like it was made by an elephant. That afternoon I dropped over on Skunk Creek and found the 5-K wagon, camped on a flat near the creek. The minute I saw that roundup wagon, I knew that the bear had been there ahead of me. There were five or six cowboys trying to get it back into one piece. It was a wrecked cow outfit and no mistake.

Here's the story the way they gave it to me: There was nobody in camp but "Fido" Adams, the cook, when old Silver Tip showed up. And he was only about ten feet away when Fido first noticed him. And that camp was too small for both of them, so Fido went up a tree.

Old Silver Tip went through that camp like Grant went through Richmond. Even tipped over the bed wagon trying to get into a barrel of bacon and sowbelly. When I looked at that messed-up cow camp, I wondered why big city contractors would hire a bunch of men to tear down a building when all you had to do was to get one bear and put pepper in his eyes.

After he left the 5-K wagon, he struck an old wood road and I followed his big tracks right down the middle of it. It was only about three miles to the Skunk Creek ranger station. I figured maybe George Bacon, the ranger, had seen him. When I got there I found he had. George had been cooking a late dinner and the first sign of trouble he saw was Old Silver Tip coming through the door. That kitchen wasn't very big for two men

but it was a heap smaller for a man and a bear. He took one look at the bear and went out through the window. Did he stop to open it? I should say not! And what that bear done to that house was something to remember. He smashed everything in it. He even chewed up a picture of George's mail-order sweetheart who worked in a shirt factory some place back in New Jersey.

When George found that picture he was about twice as mad as the bear. And when he found out I was going to stay on his trail till I got him, he said he guessed as long as his home was ruined, he'd tag along and we'd both get our revenge at the same time. So he saddled up and we hit the trail.

The snow was gone by this time. We followed that bear's trail for two days. Sometimes we'd lose it in the rocks and have a hard time finding it. Then we'd find it again and go for miles. I never saw a bear travel as far and as fast as old Silver Tip did. And George was rotten company, too. He hollered about that girl's picture all day and about two-thirds of the night. She didn't look to me like she'd take any beauty prizes. But I hadn't seen the picture till after the bear chewed it up, so maybe I was giving her a tough break.

Finally Sight Silver Tip

We finally caught sight of him going down a long ridge onto the Green River flats a few miles below the lake. We didn't catch up with him that night, but saw him several times. We camped in a little Indian cave up against the river bank and were out at daylight the next morning and headed down toward a big wild berry patch. There wasn't any berries left, but the brush was thick and we thought maybe he'd hole up there for the night. He had, but was gone by the time we got there, and was headed right down the road toward the J.Y.'s.

We both knew that if he got there before we caught him, it was going to be just too bad. For Abe Trueman, the guy that owned the outfit, had a kid for every year he'd been married and he had been married about ten years, and these kids would be scattered all over the place, playing. And old Silver Tip would sure find one or two of them in his trail. They'd make about a mouthful apiece for that loco bear.

We began to push our horses a little harder. It wasn't very far to the J.Y.'s, and we didn't have any way of knowing how much of a start the bear had on us.

The bear was just going through the upland pasture fence when we came in sight of the ranch.

George looked over at me with a troubled look in his eyes: "Looks like we might be a little crowded for time," he said.

I nodded, but didn't answer—just asked the old gray to give me all he had, and like he'd done a thousand times before. He give me the last ounce he had.

I was about a hundred yards ahead of George when we thundered up to the fence. My nippers were in my hand as I swung off the gray. It probably took me five minutes to cut through the wire and get in the pasture. I swung back on the old gray, pulling my rifle from my holster as I did. There wasn't going to be any time to spare.

There were about thirty head of cattle in the pasture. The boss was a big bull named "Tiny." He weighed over a ton and "Fight" was his middle name.

When the herd saw the bear coming towards them, they threw up their heads and beat it for the other end of the field—that is, all of them except Tiny. He bellered and pawed and shook his head, threw dirt up over his back, and charged. When that ton of bull hit thirteen hundred pounds of bear, both of them wild and fighting mad, the fur sure flew. The bull knocked the bear over and then run off a hundred feet or so and pawed and bellered. The bear started back down through the field, but the bull didn't aim to let him leave. With a loud beller he charged again, but this time his luck was bad, for the bear r'ared up on his hind legs, and when he got in reach knocked him for a loop. He lay still. It looked like Silver Tip had killed the bull.

Race With Death

Then old Silver Tip turned and made tracks toward the house, and just as I thundered by, the big bull staggered to his feet shaking his head. He was bleeding like a stuck hog.

When I looked back at the bear lumbering down the field, I saw something that made my hair stand on end. A couple of Abe's kids were playin' in a

pile of dirt and they were right in the path of the bear, not six hundred yards away. I drove my spurs into the old gray and called on him again. He could pace a mile in three minutes and he was sure doing it.

I was afraid to shoot, I might hit one of the kids. There was just one way to stop that bear, and that was to drop my rope on him and try and hold him till the kids could get to a place of safety. I knew that if old Abe was around any place he'd show up with his rifle plenty fast. And neither him nor George would have to shoot often to send old Silver Tip to bear heaven.

I threw away my useless rifle, grabbed my rope and say, I built the fastest loop I ever built.

That bear wasn't twenty feet from the kids, when the old gray thundered up in throwing distance and the loop settled around his neck. Eagle sat back on his haunches and I prayed for the rope and saddle to hold. They did. Old Silver Tip turned over in the air and hit the ground like a ton of brick. He lay stunned for a few seconds. Me and the old gray tried to choke him down, but he was too big and strong.

Just as he got to his feet, I saw the kids beatin' it for the house. They was headin' for their mama as fast as their little legs could carry, and hollerin' at every jump. Old Silver Tip forgot all about the kids, all he could see was me and old Eagle and he thought so much of us he wanted to hug us to death.

Bear Charges

About that time George came up. His rifle cracked and the bear went down, but he didn't stay. Then George's horse bucked him off. I was in a pretty tough spot. George, lying on the ground unconscious, and my rifle lost in the tall grass a quarter of a mile back, and me with a thirteen-hundred-pound bear on the end of a rope. I knew if I didn't get help of some kind, it wouldn't be long before I wouldn't need any.

The bear charged. My old gray dodged and busted him again. His neck must have been pretty sore by that time, but we couldn't hold him down. About that time Abe came pelting up on the high run.

His rifle spanged and the bear went down but he was on his feet in a second, blood running out of his mouth and nose. He was a man-killing bear and no mistake. About this time the bull showed up. He ran around us in a big circle, bellerin', pawing and gorin' the ground with his huge horns, and I couldn't help wondering who he was going to help—me or the bear.

The crazy bull was sure making things tough on everybody. Nobody could tell what he was going to do. George was on his feet by this time and him and Abe were throwin' lead into old Silver Tip as fast as they could pump it out of their guns. He was staggering now, but still full of fight and dangerous. He rushed the old gray again and we barely got out of his way. Out of a corner of my eye, I saw Abe beat it to the house for more shells and George hollered to me that he didn't have any more either. And there I was. It looked like me and the old gray had played our last tune.

The bull's circles were getting smaller all the time. He was getting bolder and it was a cinch he was going to charge soon. I heard a beller of rage and two thousand pounds of red Hereford bull charged by. He hit the bear like an express train. Bear and bull went down. They were on their feet in a second. The bear r'ared up on his hind legs and with a mighty blow of his huge front paw knocked the bull to his knees and then the rope broke.

The old gray and I had a chance. We could get away. But I stood fascinated, watching those two enraged brutes battle. I knew that one would die, perhaps both. One of the bull's horns was knocked off and he was covered with blood. Every sweep of the bear's paw took hide and meat. If old Silver Tip hadn't been full of lead, he'd have killed the bull in pretty short order. And just as Abe ran up with his rifle all loaded, the bull drove his remaining horn into the bear and ended one of the most terrific battles I'd ever seen.

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The tall rider swayed in his saddle, then fell

Tobe Cotton learns there are some problems only a bullet can settle!

BUZZARDS

By DAVID X. MANNERS

TOBE COTTON felt there was going to be trouble the moment he stepped inside the Mercantile and recognized the customer standing at the counter.

The customer didn't turn. He kept right on talking. But the girl behind the counter saw Tobe and she arrested an impulse to smile and greet him warmly.

It wouldn't, of course, have been a good idea to greet Tobe Cotton that way

when the customer was Pete Domino.

Pete Domino turned slowly, his expression hardening.

"Hello, Cotton," he drawled. "You would drop in just when I was havin' a nice chat with Arbelle."

Pete Domino, in his middle twenties, was tall, slender and blond-haired. He would have been handsome except for a stubbornness about his mouth and a lack of warmth in his light gray eyes.

"Sorry." Tobe Cotton grinned good-naturedly. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I know it's always nice when pleasure can come before business."

Domino's eyes flashed. "An' I reckon it's business and not Arbelle that's brought you in here now?"

He sauntered toward Tobe, and Arbelle quickly came around the counter.

"Boys," she said. There was fright in her young, delicately-featured face and, as she looked from one to another of the cowboys her chestnut curls leaped with the movement. She scarcely looked her eighteen years.

"Please let's not have any argument here."

PETE DOMINO took another step forward to stand directly in front of Tobe, obviously to emphasize the fact that he was the taller of the two. Tobe Cotton had black hair and dark eyes and he was not slender. His broad shoulders and legs and arms were strong as young oaks. He had a dark brow and hands that were rope-calloused and work-roughened.

"Let's leave Arbelle out of this, if you don't mind," Cotton said. "Me and Cherokee just drove in to get some sacked corn and supplies. I came peaceable and I aim to leave the same way. Here's a tally of the things I want, Arbelle. When I finish some other little business I got to attend to I'll be back to pick up the order."

Handing the list to Arbelle, and with a brief nod to Domino, Tobe Cotton turned toward the front entrance of the Mercantile. He was aware, from the sound of footsteps behind him, that Domino was following him to the door. But he was not prepared for what came next.

The palmed hand caught Tobe just between the shoulder blades. The hard thrust sent him pitching headfirst out the door and down the two steps to sprawl on the boardwalk.

Cotton heard Cherokee Adams, whom he had left with the wagon, curse angrily and leap down from the seat. Tobe came erect to look back up at Domino standing in the doorway, his thumbs hooked in his belt and a grin on his lips.

"Excuse me, Tobe," the blond cowboy said. "I didn't mean to shove so hard. All I wanted was for you to stand aside so a gentleman could step out first."

Left hand clutching, Tobe Cotton went up one step and caught the smirking Domino by the shirt front. With a quick jerk, he dragged him down to the boardwalk. Then his right fist arched up and over. It landed with a crack on Domino's jaw, and now it was the taller man's turn to sprawl on the boardwalk. His hand struck for his gun, but Tobe's boot toe met the gun wrist hard, and the weapon went skittering into the dust of the street.

Without giving Domino time to recover, Cotton fixed a firm hold on his coat collar and dragged him ten yards to the livery. He was aware that men were pouring out of doorways everywhere as he picked Domino up and dumped him into the water trough. Without waiting to see what happened then, he pushed his way back through the gathering throng toward the Mercantile. He met Sheriff Jack Blassingame, angling from his office across the street, there.

Cherokee Adams grabbed the lawman's arm.

"You see what happened," the half-breed said. "That no-good loafer, Domino, started it, shoving Tobe out the door. If anything starts again, you'll know where the fault lies."

"Keep quiet, Cherokee," Tobe cut in angrily. "There's no call for apologies."

Sheriff Blassingame, scarcely older than Tobe's own twenty-four, looked the stocky cowboy up and down.

"All right, Cotton, move on," he said "Just don't let it go no further than this, is all."

He walked on then to where a half dozen cronies had pulled Domino from the trough, and where, sputtering and dripping, he was restrained by their strong grips.

Arbelle had come out of the Mercantile. Her father was right behind her. The girl searched Cotton's face anxiously.

"I'm all right," he told her.

"I didn't want him around, Tobe," Arbelle said. "But he just comes in and I can't get rid of him. And Dad hates to throw folks out."

"I intend to take care of that little chore for you, Arbelle," Tobe said, "if you just give me the word."

"I give you my word," Arbelle said.

Despite the promise of trouble it implied, what Arbelle said filled Tobe with a pervading warmth. It had been an uphill struggle since he had come to Royal City two years before, a town so new grass still grew in its streets. But the railroad had just come through, and on its neighboring range there seemed to be both the promise of a bright future and a new start.

TOBE'S life up to that moment had not been without its difficulties. He had never known his mother, and his father had been Black Bill Cotton, the famous gambler and gunman. One stormy night, when Tobe had been eleven, Black Bill had gone on a foray below the Border and had not returned. Tobe had taken it for granted he was dead. He wasn't to find him until ten years later, broken in health and nearly blind—a mere shadow of the hard-riding, hard-fighting, roistering gunman he had once been.

Those ten years Black Bill had languished in a Mexican juzgado.

It showed Tobe Cotton what his own fate might be if he kept on with the wild, reckless life that had been his since he had grown up. He hadn't meant to get into trouble, but living the only kind of life he knew, trouble had seemed to pursue him—the kind of trouble that usually ended up with dead men lying in the dust. Tobe had lent his gun for hire on more than one occasion to what he thought were honest causes—only to find out that "honest" was a term that got awfully loose some times.

Now, shocked into realization, he meant to be through with all that. Now, he decided, with a modest stake the first decent thing he could do would be to provide a home for his father's declining years. More than anything, too, he wanted one for himself—in a place where he could start afresh.

Twenty-five hundred dollars could not buy much of a ranch, but it had knocked down Buzzards' Roost spread and a hundred head of stock from Pete Domino. Twenty-five hundred and a balance of a thousand to be ticked off in five semi-annual instalments. The ranch had looked almost worthless, and it was just that till Tobe went to work on it with Cherokee Adams, a rather simple cowpoke he had befriended.

Pete Domino laughed at first at the deal he had put over on Cotton in unloading the property, as in the saloons he gambled and drank away the money Tobe had paid him. Money was scarce in the years following the War Between the States, and cattle were more of a liability than an asset. But the coming of the railroad, among other things, had changed the picture. Dusty, sun-stricken stations along the track were now shipping points for cattle, and in the two years Tobe Cotton had been in Royal City, the price of beef had jumped from eight dollars a head for cows and twelve for steers to twelve for cows and twenty for steers. And Pete Domino's jealousy was rankling.

His supplies bought and loaded in the wagon now, Tobe Cotton headed with Cherokee back toward the acres where he ran his Buzzards' Roost iron. Rounding the last turn on the road before fording the sand-bedded creek, he heard a rider following them. He had an uneasy feeling at the way the horse was being urgently pushed, and then his feeling changed to one of complete surprise when the rider broke from cover and he recognized the face.

"Arbelle," he murmured.

Tobe thrust the reins into Cherokee's hands and dropped from the wagon seat as she drew up to him, slid to a halt. His first surprise at seeing the girl was dissipated by the realization that while he had to stick to the wagon road and the pace of the two plodding mules, a solitary rider could short cut across the hills in half the time it took him. Arbelle went briefly into his arms.

"What's up?" he said.

"Pete Domino, of course," Her breath was quickened and her cheeks flushed and moist. "He went into a raving act the minute you left town. He swears he's going to shoot you like a dog. Oh, Tobe, I'm afraid he's going to ambush you. He says you cheated him on the deal for the Buzzards' Roost, and that he might have known a man couldn't trust the son of Black Bill Cotton!"

Tobe's teeth clicked tight, and a little muscle began to work in his jaw.

"Don't worry," he said after a moment. He squeezed Arbelle's hand reassuringly. "I'll take care of it."

"But how can you? He packs two guns, and you don't even wear one. Tobe, promise me you'll be careful."

HE READ the worry in her eyes. If anything happened to him, all her plans for the future would be gone. "I'll be careful," he said.

"And he's tricky, Tobe. You may not realize it, but he is. He has a way of making himself seem harmless—when he's most dangerous!"

"Coyote tracks look like dog tracks," Cotton agreed, "but there are differences if you watch sharp. I aim to."

She stepped back to her horse and brought down a package she had carefully tied to her saddle.

"I've got to go now," she said then. "I've still supper to get for Dad. But here's something for you."

He watched her disappear from sight over the crest of the ridge as she rode away. He smelled the paper-wrapped package she had given him as he turned back to Cherokee. Even before opening it he knew what was inside. The bottom of the thing was still oven-warm.

"Fruit cobbler," Cherokee yelped.

"Made o' wild plums and sourdough," Tobe added, and for the moment the tension of the day was dissolved. "Let's get to the house an' get out the tin plates an' eatin' tools!"

When their wagon rolled into the ranchyard, old Bill was sitting, dozing in the late afternoon sun. His cane was between his legs, his face turned toward the glowing disc, absorbing the radiant tonic which eased the throb of old bullet wounds and scars. Remembering the way his father had been, Tobe was reminded again of the toll of grim, gunfighting years.

After supper, Tobe waited until Black Bill was in bed before he lit the table lamp, and brought out the Peacemaker .45 from the chest at the end of his own bunk. With it he brought oil and solvent and cleaning patches, and began to disassemble the weapon.

Concentrating on his task, he did not hear the footsteps behind him until the creaking of a floor board betrayed the presence. Tensely, Tobe whirled. Then he settled back in his chair, the breath running slowly out of him.

"Don't sneak up on a man thataway, Dad," he said. "An' what are you doin' out of bed?"

"I couldn't sleep," the old gunman said. He stood there in his nightshirt watching Tobe. "I was thinkin' what you said at supper about the augerment with Pete Domino. An' now I find you cleanin' your gun. What do you plan, kid?"

Except for his nearly white hair the old man was a counterpart of his son. There was the same stockiness, the same twist to the nose.

"I don't plan nothin', Dad," Tobe said. "But I aim to be ready."

Black Bill dragged over a chair and settled into its creaking seat. He stretched out his stiff leg, resting his cane between his knees.

"You never wear guns," he said. "It's what I taught you. It's no good to start now, Tobe."

"I've used guns before," Tobe said. "I'm not the helpless kid you used to know."

"Sure, sure," Bill agreed, closing his eyes as he spoke and folding his hands on the head of his cane. "But facin' a man who also has a gun is different from usin' a shootin' iron on a rattler or a hydrophoby skunk or in bringin' down some game for your pot. An' then there's the gal."

"Arbelle?"

"You're sweet on her," Bill said. "You aim to be wed—an' then there's certain to be young 'uns. It's them I'm thinkin' of, Tobe. Young 'uns learn from the example of their parents, an' that's why it ain't good to be a gun-totin' man."

"I don't aim to be gun-totin' always." Tobe said. "This Pete Domino is fixin' for trouble. You wouldn't want me to be caught without fangs?"

Black Bill wagged his head slowly. "I wouldn't want you to get blood on your hands. A man's blood. It'll never wash off, kid. Stay clean, an' with a clean conscience, for the sake of what it'll mean to your young 'uns. They'll learn it from you."

Tobe Cotton took a walk out into the night before he turned in, thinking things out for himself. A bland wind was turning the windmill, and it was creaking rustily. He passed the horse barn and Jupiter, his mount, whinnied

softly to him. He looked up at the roof he had put on the barn. He looked at the new corner posts he had put under the corn crib. And it was all good. Now this trouble had come up which threatened to spoil it all.

These weren't pan-flat grasslands, but it was land as rich as any overflow ground along a river and it would be good for generations without fertilizer. Already he was raising cattle as fat as butter and soon he'd see them increased so that every creek, coulee and hollow on his spread would give them forth come roundup time.

THERE was a way out, he figured. There was a way out of most things if you tussled with them long enough. It was like the problem he had with the buzzards, with the fate of all Buzzards' Roost ranch depending on its solution. The losses the evil-smelling birds caused to the stock had made it almost impossible to carry on. It was because of them that Pete Domino had unloaded the place at a bargain price.

The buzzards boldly killed and ate new-born calves. They could get away with it because a cow was usually too weak at the time of the birth of her calf to fight them off, or if she did try to defend it, lunging at them, she was likely to kill her calf by stepping on it. And mature cows, ill or injured, were often the victims too.

More than once Tobe had come upon buzzards perched on the backs of cows caught in bog-holes, waiting for them to die. When it took four years to produce a cow with a calf large enough to bring a good price it was both tragic and discouraging to lose it.

Tobe had soon learned buzzards could not be brought under control by poison, and that trying to shoot them with a rifle was a hopeless task. On his ranch was the largest buzzards' roost in many counties. He found them roosting in both dead and live trees, in cliffs and creek banks, and making their nests on the ground or ledges or by old stumps. Though a mother buzzard never hatched more than two young at one nesting, their ravenous flocks seemed to multiply too rapidly to control. Then Tobe had hit upon a method of trapping them. And now, standing in the dark on the site of the old roost, he could see the trap he and Cherokee had built.

Posts eight and a half feet long had been buried two feet in the ground in a rough circle twenty feet across. Over the top and around the circular sides, they had stretched wire. A tunnel entrance that narrowed to an opening of ten by sixteen inches allowed the buzzards to go in, but once in, the wide-winged birds could never get out again. The trap was baited at the start, but even that, once a few buzzard decoys were in, was not necessary again, and incoming buzzards ate the dead ones.

Time had brought a solution to the buzzard problem and had transformed the ranch from a near worthless holding to a substantial asset. Tobe guessed that time, too, would bring the answer to the challenge of Pete Domino.

In the days that followed, Tobe Cotton expected Domino's action to come momentarily. Then he realized that Domino was probably allowing him an interval so his guard would be relaxed. And Domino didn't want to seem, obviously, to be the aggressor. Tobe figured then that as long as he stayed on his own property, he was probably safe from attack. That is, unless Domino tried to get him by means other than a gun.

It was a disquieting thought, for the ways a violent death could be rigged and disguised as an accident were legion. Tobe found himself double-checking cinch-straps to see that they hadn't been tampered with, or looking for wires stretched across a trail, so that a rider couldn't see them, but which could quickly end his life if he headed into one.

The feeling someone was tracking him came over him and grew. Birds starting up in sudden flight where all should be quiet, seemed to lend evidence to his disquieting hunch that all was not normal or serene in the brush. He could not shake off the suspicion that wherever he rode, eyes watched his transit.

He was surprised, however, several days later, when he saw Domino riding openly on his range. And that he came alone made it doubly notable. Usually one or more of his saloon hangers-on friends flanked him.

Tobe and Cherokee had, as it happened, come down to their buzzard trap to clean the thing. If it hadn't been for the usual necessity of dispatching countless birds, Tobe probably wouldn't have

been wearing his gun. And then he knew why Domino had openly and boldly invaded his territory. Six months had gone by, and the final payment was due on what was owed Domino for the ranch. With that thought came the disquieting knowledge that if, for some reason, the amount was defaulted, Domino could repossess the ranch.

Tobe studied the tall blond rider as he came up. Domino was wearing a huge, cream-colored hat, black coat and striped pants. The narrow tie at his collar added a dashing note. He did not dismount, but he unbuttoned his coat so that it hung free, giving him ready access to the gun strapped about his middle.

He nodded a greeting, all the time looking curiously at the trap. His gray eyes suddenly grew harder.

"So that's how you cleaned up my place," he exclaimed, and the jealous anger reddened his face. He laughed scornfully. "Now that you've showed me how it's done, you wouldn't want to sell my place back to me, would you?"

"I might at that," Tobe said. He was silent a moment. "But as you can realize, it wouldn't be at anything like the same figure I paid you for it."

DOMINO jerked a laugh. "So you come right out with it, that you cheated me on what you paid me?"

"I didn't cheat you. It's no longer the same place it was then," Tobe replied evenly. "It was rundown and going to pieces when I took over. But I'm beginning to see the daylight now."

"You had me over a barrel, Cotton," Domino declared. "You didn't give me what the place was worth. Admit it! You gave me what I had to take because I was cryin' for cash. Now don't call me a liar. I won't be called a liar by any man or by anybody who pretends to be a man."

"I haven't called you a liar or anything else," Tobe said. "I'm paying you off now the last of what I owe. Then Buzzards' Roost ranch will be mine without a string. I got a blank draft folded here in my tally book. I'll make it out to you, Domino. Then I want you to get off this place an' stay off."

He reached for the book. And then it happened.

A shot cracked on the slope beyond the creek. Tobe involuntarily whirled in that direction, dropping the book and grabbing for his gun. Even as he did, he realized Domino was pulling up his weapon and he cursed his stupidity. He'd been caught flatfooted in the oldest gun-trap in existence!

A second shot rang out, and then a quick volley more. But they weren't coming from Domino. Domino was triggering at Tobe, but it was the reflexive jerking of lifeless nerves. Domino's bullets were digging into the dirt far short of Tobe. The tall blond rider swayed in his saddle, then fell.

Tobe swung toward the creekbank now, but the gun that had spoken there was ominously still. Then, out of the rocks, a familiar figure appeared, a cane in one hand, a smoking gun in the other.

"The dirty lowdown varmints!" the man swore.

"Dad!" Tobe gasped.

Black Bill hobbled forward a pace, poked at something in the rocks.

"There's a dead one up here too, kid. I plugged the skunky bushwhacker just as he let go a shot at you. He meant to get you to turn, so you'd be dead meat for Domino's gun. The dirty decoy!"

Tobe moved cautiously then to where Domino lay. The man was as dead as a bullet in the head could make him. Cherokee, who'd scrambled up the slope toward Black Bill, rolled a body out from the rocks.

"This one's toes up all right," he announced, and Tobe, heading that way, recognized him as a loafer known as Shanghai Lutz.

Then Tobe was at his father's side, incredulous questions tumbling from his lips.

"But Dad where did you come from? How did you ever get out here? Up on thick rocky slope—how did you ever climb it?"

The oldtime gunman chuckled. "Not bad shootin', was it, for a halfblind old bat? You're my boy, ain'tcha? Well, I gotta look out for you, kid. Ever since that trouble you had with Domino, I been figgerin' on somethin' like this, so I been follering you as best I could wherever you went, lookin' out for you."

Tobe stared down at his own gun, still cold and unfired in his hand.

"But you did it all. I didn't even get off one shot. Not one."

"That's the way I wanted it," Black Bill said, closing his eyes as he talked.

"They'll hang me shore when they find out this day's work, for then they'll know I'm Black Bill and there's unpaid crimes on my head—killings that because of my bad name I can't ever prove to the law was necessary. But I'm glad I done this. Glad, kid. I'm an old man and I can die happy now, because I got peace for you. I didn't want any blood or killings on your head, Tobe. I wanted you to stay clean, for the sake of what your young'uns are gonna think of you. An' I got my wish. So let 'em hang me high."

Tobe shook his head.

"Nobody's hangin' for this, Dad," he said. Plucking Black Bill's gun from his hand, he slipped it into his own holster. He put his own unfired gun in his father's scabbard. "I'm ridin' in to town right now to see the sheriff. If it can be fixed, Dad, I'm fixin' things."

He found his own horse where he had tied it earlier among the pecans along the creek. Mounting, he turned toward the trail. He had gone less than a hundred yards when hoofbeats sounded ahead of him, and he reined down. As if his own thoughts had conjured him, he saw Sheriff Jack Blassingame riding toward him.

Quickly, Tobe explained what had happened. He changed it in only one detail. Instead of naming his father as the killer, he named himself.

The lawman's face grew grim as Tobe spoke. When Tobe had finished, he didn't answer for a long moment, as if he were studying the thing out.

"You remember the warning I gave you, Tobe?" he said then. "The warning when you first showed up in Royal City? I said I didn't intend this as a healthy spot for gunmen. You had a bad record, Tobe, but I was willing to overlook it. You said the string of killings in your past was finished, and I knew they had all been ones for which the law couldn't hold you. I know, too, that Pete Domino was a bad actor. Like those buzzards can't keep away from carrion, so he can't keep away from trouble. I saw him and Shanghai headin' out this way, that's why I followed as soon as I possibly could. He'd been makin' his brag as to how he was going to shoot you for sure."

The lawman was silent again.

"What happens now?" Tobe asked.

"I'll get Fredericks, the undertaker, to come for the bodies," the lawman said. "You better ride back and stand watch with Cherokee till I get back with Fred. I'd hate to have the buzzards get busy first."

It was hours later, the dead men had been packed away, and Tobe, Cherokee and Black Bill headed back to the ranchhouse silently. They sat down in the kitchen, still without saying a word.

"It's good," Black Bill said then. "You've kept yourself clean, Tobe. You'll have young'uns, my grandchildren, an' they'll have a father they can be proud of."

He hobbled over and lifted his gun which Tobe still had in his own holster. He carried it back with him to the table. From his pocket he took out a knife and began to carve a notch on the gun's handle, placing it carefully, neatly along the string of other notches.

"Children learn by the example of their parents," Black Bill said.

Tobe watched as he carved the notch. "That's right," he said. "They do."

A BIG DOUBLE FEATURE NUMBER NEXT ISSUE—FEATURING TWO NEW COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS OF THE FIGHTING WEST!

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RIFLE BAIT by W. C. TUTTLE

and

TEXAS TRAIL BOSS by ROE RICHMOND

The Gumbo hairpin is knocked down and trampled

Cowhide Masquerade

By FRANCIS H. AMES

Sandstone proves justice has its bite when the citizens descend on Gumbo town to recover Silver Carson's teeth!

AFTER Silver Carson, the portly and dignified mayor of the cowtown of Sandstone, decides the case of Fiddlefoot Potter versus Cameron Sprowl, the side-windin' citizens of the no-good town of Gumbo Flats raises a howl to high heaven. They claims that Silver Carson ain't got no legal right whatever to act as the Justice of the Peace in Cannonball County. They demands a special election to settle this here important issue.

Us Sandstone hairpins, bein' real

democratic and peaceable fellers, can't rake up no argyments that will hold water ever against this procedure. We puts up Silver Carson as our candidate fer the office of Justice of the Peace. Gumbo Flats puts up their pot-bellied mayor, Flint Tuttle. This here special election gets goin' like a three ringed circus. Carson and Tuttle gallops around the county spoutin' off to beat the cards.

"I'll talk Tuttle clean off his pins," declares Silver Carson.

Us Sandstone citizens realizes, of course, that Flint Tuttle will fling us in the hoosegow, right and left, if he gets elected. But we don't worry none. In Cannonball county the most important appearin' and loudest bellerin' gent allus gets elected. We knows that there simple ain't a hairpin in the state of Montana what kin outroar and outstrut Silver Carson. Outside of beatin' off the ears of such ignorant and arguin' Gumbo characters as we happens to encounter, we don't get het up a-tall. The election is in the bag.

However, when some owlhoot jasper sneaks up and filches our candidate's rubber snappers, while he is curled up in a deserted line shack near Gumbo Flats, we finds ourselves up against a hoss of a entirely different color. We rears up on our hind legs and paws the breeze. This here terrible news circulates around the range like a glancin' rifle slug. Sandstone citizens climbs their broncs and rushes ory-eyed to the town hall, primed for action.

Time I arrives the mayor's office is jammed to the rafters. I sees such salty citizens as Knothole Dobbs and his brother, Highpockets. Slim Blaine, Pa Higgins, Hank Willard, Shorty Downs, and Curly Ransome is on hand, rarin' to go.

Silver Carson is prancin' around his cracker box office wavin' his arms to beat the cards. His ferocious white whiskers is flappin' in the breeze, but you can't hardly understand what he is sayin'. The hair raisin' beller with which he subdues his opponents, so to speak, is plumb gone. He is disarmed complete. Without his false teeth he is ruined.

KNOTHOLE DOBBS, who is our most exasperatin' citizen, walks around with his pale, washed out peepers harder than icicles.

"Boys," he says, "sneakin' up on a gent and filchin' his store-bought facial ornaments is the most under-handed trick what I has ever encountered."

"We got to get 'em back," burbles Silver Carson. "The election is day after tomorrow. If I don't speak at Antelope tomorrow we loses the election to Tuttle, shore as shootin'."

"I votes," snaps Highpockets Dobbs, suckin' on his tremendous knuckles, "that we prances over to Gumbo Flats and splatters every denizen in the place right below the beak. Then we gathers up all stray teeth what flies out ontil we gets Carson's back."

"Maybe," I puts in, hopeful like, "you swallers them rubber gadgets. We'd better take a gander down your gullet, Carson."

"Gullet!" yells Carson, glarin' at me and gettin' purple in the face. "Why you worm!"

"Course he didn't swaller 'em," declares Knothole. "He simple puts 'em in a termater can side of his bed when he retires. We has knocked most of the teeth out of them Gumbo Flats rustlers in the past. Most of them is chewin' their beef with their gums. They shore does need false gadgets, so they snuck over and filched Carson's, shore as you're born."

"We can't," puts in Slim Blaine, who is a terrible battler himself, "go over to Gumbo and peer down the gullets of them lead-slingin' hairpins."

"We'd get ventilated right and left," says Pa Higgins.

"I got a idee how we can stroll around the streets of the no good town of Gumbo," puts in Curly Ransome, "without no one knowin' who we is. I reads this here trick in a book."

We all turns and looks at Curly. He is our most educated readin' gent. This narrow waddie with the crafty lookin' features can come up with the most hair-raisin' schemes for fellers to get massacred that you ever hears of. He can do

same without turnin' a hair, to so speak.

"You has!" yelps High Dobbs. "Then spit it out Curly, and let us chaw on it."

"All we got to do," Curly drawls, "is to get some cowhides with the heads and horns on 'em. We pairs off, two to a hide. There is all sorts of critters runnin' loose in the streets of Gumbo Flats. A few extra won't be noticed at all. We slips into town after dark. Then we circulates around among the outlaw citizens. We looks 'em over real careful. Does we see a gent who looks suspicious we reaches out and knocks said feller plumb cold. Then we takes his teeth. We is bound to come up with Silver Carson's sooner or later."

I HAS heard all of Curly Ransome's hair raisin' schemes in the past. I is plumb astounded by this here one. I rares up like I has been rear stung by a hornet. I is all set to protest, loud and long, when Knothole Dobbs speaks up. Knothole is a tall rannie with washed out blue peepers and a half bald, pointed dome. He has a face like a discouraged saddle bronc. He don't look like he has any sense whatever. He is our most exasperatin' and battlin' citizen. They ain't a man in Sandstone who won't foller wherever he leads. When Knothole Dobbs talks we all listens, for a fact. He looks around at us sad like.

"Boys," he says, "Curly Ransome has went and saved our bacon again. Pick yore partners fer the waltz. We'll meet on the ridge behind Gumbo Flats at dusk. Bring cowhides with the heads and horns on. Bring sack sewin' needles and thread. This is goin' to be a real party."

He turns and snaps his fingers at me. The big waddie has chose me for his partner. I swells up like a poisoned pup. I'm a gent that'll foller Knothole Dobbs myself.

"I'll lead this here foray agen the enemy," Silver Carson bubbles, snortin' in his whiskers like a spooked bronc. "We'll get my rubber snappers back tonight or die in the attempt."

I don't hardly like the sound of them words, but I won't back up now. Me and Knothole heads for for his spread and slaughters a red, three-year-old steer. We skins it out real careful.

"Sneakin' up on a man while he is asleep and stealin' his store bought facial gadgets," Knothole Dobbs says, his eyes glitterin' as he fingers the two-foot horns on our steer hide, "is somethin' what I simply won't stand for. These here horns will make ferocious weapons —I will personal get in the front end of this hide."

The way Knothole says this makes my spine shiver. We rides a long swing around Gumbo and comes up on the high ridge behind it. The boys is all waitin' fer us.

"Get in your hides, men," snorts Silver Carson. "Me and Slim Blaine will lead the charge in our black bull hide. Pa Higgins will watch the horses in the brush. Soon as any gent latches on to my teeth, by fair means or foul, he'll sound off with six loud bellers. Pa will charge down with the broncs and we'll dash off with the loot, so to speak."

"How," I asks, innocent like, "kin two gents in one cowhide leap on two broncs? It simply can't be did, Carson."

Carson looks at me like I is a ignorant insect.

"You'll get on," he declares, "one way or the t'other, when the times comes."

I figgers we will, at that, but my hair rises.

We starts scramblin' around, gettin' into our hides. That there mesa is shore boilin' with salty Sandstone jaspers. Time we gets rigged out and I get around to lookin' folks over, I don't see how we can possibly fool even fellers as dumb as the Gumbo rannies. I never did see critters on the range what looks like we does. I never seen no bow-legged beefs that is all sway backed.

Highpockets Dobbs, who is tall and limber, is teamed up with Shorty Downs, who is short and sad faced. They is rigged out in a red steer hide with curved horns. They makes up the most horrifyin' animal you ever clapped your eyes on. This bleery eyed critter is all of six feet four in the rear. It is under five feet in the front, where Shorty is cooped

up, so to speak. They looks like a camel, pushin' a cultivator. Their head and horns hangs off to the side, sort of discouraged like. When they walks the horns plows a furrow. When they runs, as they shore does later in the evening, Highpockets either steps in the rear pocket of Shorty's jeans and gallops along on one leg ontil he topples over complete, or he steps on Shorty's spurs and drives the pore feller horns first in the sod. Shorty tells me later that his skull bone crackles like a sack of broke eggs.

Curly Ransome is teamed up with Hank Willard in the hide of a dun colored steer. They has a wash tub stuck in the middle. The animal's eyes bug out like it has recently swallered a waterin' trough. The head rears back like the pore critter is searchin' the sky fer low flyin' buzzards.

The most outlandish and onbelievable Herford in the whole bunch is Mayor Carson and Slim Blaine, t r a i p s i n' around like a water-logged buffalo in the hide of a black Angus bull. This bull appears to weigh nigh onto a thousand pounds in front, where Carson is. The mayor's pot-belly pooches out its chest like a struttin' prize fighter. The beast is so narow in the rear, where Blaine hangs out, that a feller can almost shave with it. Mayor Carson prances around on his flat feet emitin' the most amazin' bellers and pawin' the sod, so to speak.

Me and Dobbs crawls into our outfit. Curly Ransome says that we looks like a horned giraffe. Knothole prances and I waddle. We smells somethin' awful. I has never found myself in no such horrible predicament before.

"Cut fightin' holes in your hides," orders Carson, "and sew up the middles. Let's get goin'. We'll ease down into this here owlhoot town and get my teeth back or tear the jawbones out of every hairpin in the place."

CAUTIOUS like, I peers out the slit in the side of our hide. The sun is gone down and the flats below is dark with purple shadows. The Cannon Balls stand up mysterious in the distance. Lights are beginning to twinkle in the windows of Gumbo Flats.

"Off we go, boys," Knothole Dobbs grits out, stickin' his sad beak out under our critter's chin. "We'll saunter down the slope easy like, lowerin' our snoots to graze every now and then so we'll look plumb natural if they spots us."

Me and Knothole starts off easy like but we don't go far thataway. Knothole stops suddenlike to graze and I steps on his star rowels. We rolls hoofs over horns, snortin' like startled buffalos. Knothole struggles somethin' awful and durn nigh blacks both my peepers on the way down. I deposits my cud of Climax square between the long geared hombre's shoulder blades. We winds up against the side of the Gumbo saloon with a bone crunchin' thud. This here is the most startlin' maneuver what I has ever encountered. I am battered complete. Knothole's horns is driven under the saloon and we is crumpled like a accordian. I has my head inside Knothole's vest.

I learns later that the rest of the boys makes her down that steep hill in grand style, too. High Dobbs steps in Shorty's rear pocket. They leaps along on three legs ontil High topples over. Then he rides Shorty's neck all the way down. They bangs into the alley and winds up against the back of the Gumbo cafe with a sickenin' clatter. High tells me later that this here deal works out fine. Seems like their horns don't hang down no more. The head of their red steer is clamped on Shorty's cranium tighter'n a leech. He can't pry it off noways. Them two exasperated hairpins backs around the alley, pawin' and snortin', while Shorty tries to onlatch the head bone from his skull.

Silver Carson and Slim Blaine tells me later that they decides that they kin go a heap faster and more accurate, so to speak, by runnin' sideways, neck and neck, peerin' out their peep holes. This here works out fine, they says, ontil they gets goin' in ten feet leaps and straddles a scrub cedar. The portly mayor of Sandstone is smokin' a long, black cigar. He swings around that there stubborn

tree and rams this lit affair in Slim Blaine's left eye, clean to the back of his cranium.

"Havin' no teeth," Carson says later, "to clamp onto that weed with, I swallers it, sparks and all. It durn nigh set my gizzard afire."

"Yes," declares Blaine, "and we'd have been tangled up with that durn tree yet if Curly Ransome and Hank Willard didn't come rollin' down the hill, brayin' real pitiful, and tear the thing clean out by the roots. We goes down the hill real sociable like after that. We hurls that there tree clean over the Gumbo saloon."

I ain't noticin' what happens to these here ignorant waddies. I has troubles of my own. I am pullin' on Knothole's limber legs, tryin' to pry his fool horns out from onder the saloon, when Dirk Kent and Rant Wilks staggers around the corner. It is plumb dark now, but I recognizes them owlhoot feller's voices right off. They peers around the corner at us real startled like.

"Seems like," declares Kent, "that I hears somethin' thud against the buildin'."

"There is some sort of a peculiar critter strugglin' around out here!" Rant Wilks exclaims, weavin' in his tracks. "Looks like a half starved three-year-old steer."

"By Gravy," gasps Kent, shovin' his face up close in the dark and feelin' of my ribs fer brands, "if this don't beat the cards! This critter has laid down one way and got up the other. It has a complete twist in its carcass. It has Knothole Dobbs' brand on it."

"Let's flip it over," says Wilks, who is in a plumb intoxicated condition, same as usual. "The pore animal can't ramble around in any such shape as that."

I KNOWS that I is about to be attacked without mercy so I reaches out and punches Rant Wilks square in the chin bone. I hauls off and kicks Dirk Kent in the gizzard. Knothole yanks his beak out from onder the saloon and goes into action. Before you can throw and hogtie a calf, them two Gumbo hairpins is knocked down, trompled, gored and more unconscious than u s u a l. Knothole reaches into their fool yawps and yanks on their molars.

"They has still got their own grinders," he snorts in disgust, flingin' a few of these articles aside.

I hears some footsteps comin' down the boardwalk.

"Quick," I says, "run for the alley."

Knothole takes off in no uncertain manner. I tries to leap as fast as he does but it ain't no use. The center of our hide stretches like a sling-shot and snaps me off my pins. I turns over in the air and takes the twist out of our pelt. When my boots hit sod, me and Knothole really gets goin'. Then I steps on his fool spurs again. He dives head-first into a iron garbage barrel behind the Gumbo cafe. I backs off, pawin' for traction and hauls him out, droolin' pertater peelin's and with chicken feathers hangin' on one horn. We spots a gent by the name of Walt Riggs staggerin' down the way, drunk like always. Knothole don't like this swell headed hairpin at all. He steps out of the alley and confronts the feller. I spots High Dobbs and Shorty Downs leanin' real graceful against the buildin' at the corner.

Walt Riggs hauls up like he has been sudden confronted with a cross between a elephant and a sea lion. His mouth flies open and he begins to back off with his eyes buggin' out'n his head. Knothole starts to ease up on him with his horns lowered. The feller lets a wail out of him like a dyin' calf as he whirls and stampedes. High and Shorty heads him off.

The feller stops so short that he skids. High makes a ten-foot leap, drivin' Shorty horns first into the gumbo, and grabs him by the neck. He lifts said waddie complete off the ground, rams his big mitt in his open yawp, and feels of his teeth. Then he flings him flatter than a flounder and dashes for our alley. Shorty is still horn anchored. High turns a sommerset like a roped calf. He gets to his pins, kicks Shorty loose as calm as you please, and pops in beside me and Knothole.

"Walt Riggs," he growls, stickin' his long nosed beak out his fightin' hole, "has got his own teeth."

Walt comes to his pins and goes leapin' down the street, howlin' bloody murder. He skids to a halt in front of the saloon as Dirk Kent and Rant Wilks limps into sight.

"They is a couple steers up the street," he yodels, "gorin' folks right and left. One of 'em has human scalps hangin' on its horns. We'd better head home for our forty-fives."

The bat wings of the saloon bursts open and the side-windin' citizens of Gumbo Flats swarm out on the street like hornets out of a hive. My hair stands on end but it don't bother Knothole none whatever.

"Aha!" he chortles. "The drunken hairpins is bunchin' up. We kin look 'em over better now. We'll have Carson's rubber grinders back in no time a-tall."

The pot bellied Mayor Flint Tuttle oozes through the herd and begins to wave his arms and beller, like always.

"What in time goes on here?" he roars.

"Goes on!" lisps Dirk Kent through his missin' front molars, "Why there is a Sandstone steer loose in town. It's plumb locoed."

"I'll say it is," yelps Rant Wilks. "The beast attacks me and Dirk. The thing is six feet tall. It tromples us into the sod and paws out our front teeth."

"Surround it, men," roars Tuttle. "We'll barbecue it. We'll show Sandstone it can't run stock on our range."

I hears a terrific clatter down the alley. We spins around jest in time to hear a terrible beller. Silver Carson and Slim Blaine is tearin' down the alley, lickety snort, with a two-thousand-pound red bull breathin' down their necks.

CARSON tells me later that every male critter, lampin' this here black bull they makes up, seems to take the animal as a direct insult to their intelligence, so to speak. He says that this red bull of Walt Riggs charges them on sight, without no warnin' whatever. Carson and Blaine is really reachin' out fer sod, runnin' sideways, when we sees them. They collides with that there iron garbage barrel and turns over twice before they final settles. The red bull bellers ontil the shingles fly off the cafe. It roots its horns under Carson's fat rear and tosses him against the side of the building. Blaine is strugglin' underneath.

The citizens in front of the saloon hears this free wheelin' fracas and dashes into the other end of the alley. They ain't hardly arrived when Hank Willard and Curly Ransome slithers in behind 'em. This upstandin' dun steer still appears to be lookin' over its shoulder, but I knows that the wily Hank is all set fer an all-out, teeth-snatchin' charge. I feels Knothole get set.

"Ah," howls Walt Riggs in glee, "my Herford bull has the Sandstone animal cornered. He'll down him in no time."

"Them fellers," softly breaths Knothole, "is the ones what is corraled—clean to the withers."

The alley is dark, except fer the dim light that comes out through the dirty rear windows of the saloon and cafe. The two bulls is whippin' around in there to beat the cards. As we gets set to leap to Carson's aid, so to speak, the Sandstone mayor gets flung end over end. Carson ain't a gent fer man nor beast to get rash with thataway. He rears up with a toothless roar, grabs that there tin barrel, and swishes it down over the red bull's head, clean to the shoulders. This baffles the animal complete. You never did hear such muffled snorts of rage issuin' out of a bucket in your life.

"Hey," yodels Walt Riggs, "my bull is dehorned! Bulldog that black bull down, boys, a'fore he gores him!"

Walt begins to sidle up on Carson, who turns around like a fat buffalo with Blaine circlin' sort of weak behind. The red bull backs off from that there barrel until he accordions his carcass against the far wall. Then he roars and paws the sod, lowers his fool head, and charges smack through the rear of the cafe. Loud yells and the clatterin' of broke dishware comes from inside. We hears fallin' glass as he issues from the front.

Silver Carson wheels instant and dives at Walt Riggs with lowered horns.

"Give me back my teeth, you rattler," he yells.

"Good grief," sputters Knothole. "The fool has went and give the deal away by singin' out."

"At 'em fellers," Knothole yells, like he is turnin' point.

Us Sandstone animals goes down that alley like string halted camels. We descends on them Gumbo citizens from all directions to once. Soon as Carson speaks out they knows that we is jest ordinary hairpins in cowhides. They immediate goes to battlin', tooth and claw.

This here is the most hair raisin' massacre what I ever engages in. Knothole makes a terrific swing with his mitt still inside our hide. This upheaval flings me like a sling shot. I lands on Flint Tuttle and brings the important Gumbo official down like kickin' the legs out from under a piano. It is shore a tough deal to whip these salty gents plumb down and grab off their molars at the same time. Trouble is, we jest get organized, smackin' folks in the whiskers, gorin' 'em agen the sides of buildin's, filchin' their teeth, right and left, anchored in or otherwise, when this tin-headed bull passes through and shuffles us complete.

This enraged animal can't see where he is goin' nohow. He circulates down the street and through the alley, plumb continuous. I has a gent by the handle of Shifty Smith by the windpipe, bangin' his fool head agen the wall with one hand while I tugs at his grinders with the t'other, when this bull passes underneath.

I shucks the molars out'n that feller as I get pinwheeled, surprisin' the gent complete. Time I lands Knothole has splattered Ram Bender. I is right on the ground when he lands. I twitches out his grinders a'fore he kin close his trap. As these is the genuine store-bought articles, I manages to shove 'em in my jeans a'fore Knothole walks on my features.

THAT there limber Sandstone rannie is shore goin' to town. He is hollerin' and hootin'. He has more fellers walkin' around that alley on rubber legs than you kin count. He claims that he don't knock 'em plumb cold, like usual, because I intereferes with his swing, so to speak. Walt Riggs, who is Gumbo's champeen bull-dogger, flips the black Angus bull on its back and rips open the center with his spurs. Highpockets Dobbs ketches him in the middle of this foul deed and punches him square in the features, durn nigh drivin' him through the back of the saloon. Carson and Blaine leaps to their feet and another agile Gumbo citizen staggers up in the bull hide between 'em. This here startled animal quivers and shakes like it has been sudden struck with the gallopin' heaves.

"That feller," declares Silver Carson later, "shore has his own teeth. He sinks same into my shoulder blades, clean to the bone, while he anchors me by standin' on my spurs."

"Yes," drawls Slim Blaine with a sly grin, "but he shore needs store bought molars now. I flings a arm around his fool neck and pries him loose. Then I punches him in the mouth six, seven times. Time I gets done he has swallered every grinder what he has, complete."

I is gettin' kicked in the ribs, flung in the air by that underpassin', tin barrel-headed bull. I is bein' trompled to death somethin' awful. I figgers I has Carson's false gadgets so I lets loose with the six-beller signal. It seems like we has gathered in quite a few sets of false grinders. We all goes to signalin' to Pa Higgins to come. The alley sounds like a herd of calf weaned cows. Pa Higgins says that it is shore confusin', but he comes larrupin' down the hill, hootin' and howlin' like a warpath Commanche.

As Pa joins the fray with nine broncs that red bull bursts his barrel out through the rear of the saloon. That there alley is a seethin' mass of hair pullin', teeth snatchin' gents, half of which is tryin' to get in their saddles. Me and Knothole gets on our broncs without no trouble whatever. Them horses starts out in different directions and we lands flat on our backs in the fracas again. I gathers up a black eye. Knothole whips

out a bowie knife and cuts us apart.

We gets in our hulls and stays there. The other Sandstone gent does likewise. All but Hank Willard and Curly Ransome. They gets mounted still tied together by their wash tub stuffed hide. A barkeep steps out of the saloon and lets fly with both barrels of a sawed off shotgun. Them high powered slugs splatters through that wash tub like grape shot from a Gatlin' gun. The two fleein' hombres straddles the Gumbo flagpole and uproots it complete. The tore hide splits loose.

Our broncs is fresh and fast. A'fore the confused Gumbo jaspers kin git mounted we has made it to the hills. We pulls up in the dark and listens. The town of Gumbo is seethin' like a beehive. We kin hear the hollow bellers of that bull resoundin' from the garbage barrel.

"I got your store bought teeth, Carson," I says, real triumphant, holdin' the gadgets out to him.

The portly official tosses off the remains of his bull hide and claps the article in his face. I never did see such a disgusted look come over a feller's map a'fore.

"These," he sputters, spittin' the things out and flingin' them in the brush, "ain't my teeth. They is a heap too small."

All told we has four sets of false snappers. None of them fits. They is all too durn small fer Carson's big yawp. We is right back where we starts. We shore is a discouraged bunch of waddies.

"Mayor Tuttle," I says, quiet like, "has his own teeth. He'll be able to orate in Antelope tomorrow."

"If I'd known that," Knothole growls, "I'd have personal clubbed out every molar what he's got. Then we'd have a even break."

"You boys," Carson says, real sorrowful, "had better tidy up your affairs. You'll all be in the hoosegow after election. We can't win now. Antelope will swing the election to Gumbo."

We all rides home and goes to bed. We is a beat-down bunch of hombres. Besides, I has two black eyes. Knothole and me sleeps at my spread ontil nigh noon the next day. When I opens my peepers I is sudden struck with a idee. I rolls over and shakes Knothole.

"Listen!" I says, real urgent. "Maybe we ain't sunk yet. Does you know where that line shack is that Carson sleeps in when he loses his teeth? Kin you ride there now?"

"Of course I kin," Knothole says. "Why?"

"Pack rats," I says.

KNOTHOLE ain't dumb. He reaches fer his pants quick like.

"Why," he asks of nobody in particular, "didn't I think of that a'fore, myself?"

We heads out for that cabin on the high run. We really takes that place apart. We fires our six-guns under the floor and pokes into things in general. Knothole stands a chair on a rickety table and reaches back under the rafters.

"There is some sort of a nest back in here!" he exclaims.

I has always heard that pack rats is plumb gentle and harmless critters. They ain't supposed to attack a person a'tall. This one is some different. Seems like it is crouched back in its nest, listenin' to all this here commotion. When Knothole rams his big mitt in its features it is plumb put out. Without no hesitation whatever it clamps down on the sad faced hairpin's thumb with the force of a meat grinder. Knothole lets out a howl and topples from his chair, landin' on my carcass. He flings the thing off his bleedin' thumb. It flies out the winder and heads fer the brush like its tail is afire.

Knothole climbs up agen and pulls out a pile of trash from under the eaves. He paws through it, plumb curious. The thievin' critter has collected two spoons, a G harmonica, a couple of pocket knives, one iron spur, a set of false teeth, and half a dozen forty-five cartridges.

"Well I swan," declares Knothole, gazin' at me in awe. "Forty-five slugs! A feller ain't safe sleepin' around such a side-winder. The critter'll disarm a man complete while he sleeps."

"Never mind the forty-fives," I yelps.

"Them is Carson's teeth. Look at the size of them. They is as big as horse shoes. Let's travel."

We comes down into Sandstone and runs up the stairs to the mayor's office. We runs into Curly Ransome.

"Where is Carson?" we shouts at him, "We have got his teeth."

"Huh," gulps Curly. "Why the pore feller is plumb desperate over this deal. I tries to hold him back but it ain't no use. He heads fer Antelope with High Dobbs. He says he will orate the best he kin without no teeth."

Big tears appears in Knothole Dobb's pale eyes. He wipes 'em away with a hairy mitt."

"There simply ain't no gent with the sand what our Mayor has got," he growls. "He is disarmed utter. Still he goes up against the enemy. Mayor Flint Tuttle will talk him right into the sod, without no teeth."

"What's holdin' us up," I yells.

"Nothin'," snarls Knothole, as he pivots and heads down stairs. We climbs our broncs and lays 'em out, belly to the ground fer Antelope. We hauls up in the main street a hour later, punchin' up dust. There is a platform on one side of the main street. It has a big banner draped over it what says, "Flint Tuttle for Justice of the Peace—the loudest talkin' gent in Cannonball County!" Mayor Tuttle is standin' up there spoutin' off to beat the cards.

On the other side of the street Mayor Silver Carson is standin' on the porch of the hotel. The brave feller is wavin' his arms ontil he is blue in the face. His whiskers is shoved out but they droops some. He is openin' and closin' his trap but Mayor Tuttle is plumb drowndin' him out. The crowd has their backs to Carson and is lookin' up at Tuttle with admiration and awe. Cattle raisin' folks is shore partial to educated fellers. The mayor of Gumbo Flats is in fine fettle.

"Ladies and gents," he howls. "I welcomes the chance to meet my unworthy opponent for J u s t i c e of Cannonball County. You now has the opportunity to see that the other gent who is runnin' is no good whatever. He would carry no weight whatever with a jury. A cattle rustler would scare him off his bench. He is the last gent that you hairpins should vote for!"

Knothole Dobbs looks at Flint Tuttle in disgust. He uncurls his lanky frame from his bronc slow and easy like. He walks up the steps to Carson. Silver watches him come and his blue eyes is full of misery. He feels, a feller kin tell, that he has let us gents down. Knothole sticks out his big mitt with them teeth layin' in his palm. A slow wonder comes to Carson's face. He reaches out and picks 'em up and clamps down on 'em. They is a couple straws and a piece of binder twine hanging out his lower lip from the pack rat's nest.

I WISH you could have seen the change what comes over the Sandstone kingpin. He swells up like a poisoned pup. His tremendous stomach pooches out and his yeller vest climbs his frame like a winder shade. His eyes regain their ferocious glare. His white whiskers sticks out ontil they fairly crackles. He opens his mouth and his plumb dignified and sonorous tones swell in the street of Antelope.

"Ladies and gents, feller citizens," he roars in a voice which spooks half the broncs in town. "I has stood here and let this wind-bag from Gumbo Flats spout off while I listens to his gosh awful hog-wash. He ain't no gent fer the dignified office of Justice of the Peace of Cannonball County. This here position requires a hairpin of impeachable effrontery, and a heap of gall. I has these articles. Justice will be administered with a iron hand, so to speak. I will lower the boom without mercy on all owl-hoot characters."

He pauses to glare around, plumb ferocious.

"Most of these jaspers," he says flatly, "lives over Gumbo Flats way."

"Elect me Justice of the Peace," he roars, "and the citizens of Antelope kin go to bed at night without havin' their teeth filched while they sleeps."

We realizes that Carson still figgers Gumbo stole his snappers. His tremen-

dous voice booms on and on. The crowd turns around and looks up at Mayor Carson of Sandstone with open mouthed wonder. Me and Knothole sashays into the saloon fer a drink. We is awful dry.

"Hot dawg," breathes Knothole reverently. "Did you ever hear anything like that feller?"

"No," I declares, sinkin' my sore breather into my beer foam, "I never did. I shore never did." The election is in the bag again.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 8)

son's title of Champion All Around Cowboy by scoring more points during the season than any other cowboy. This is the third time that he has won the I.R.A. all around championship. He won it in 1946, again in 1948, and this year's win makes him the only cowboy ever to win the title three times. And yet Rambo did not win the championship in any one event. He's just an all-around cowboy who takes part in nearly every event and always lands in the money. He won third place for the season in the saddle bronc riding, third in bareback bronc riding, fourth in calf roping, and third in steer wrestling.

Jim Shoulders finished second in the all-around, Casey Tibbs was third and Bill Linderman was fourth. Casey Tibbs won the saddle bronc riding title, Bill Linderman was second, Gene Rambo was third and Ross Dollarhide was fourth.

Jim Shoulders was the title winner in the bareback bronc riding, Duncan Brown was second, Rambo was third, and Ike Thompson was fourth.

Homer Pettigrew won the championship in calf roping, Chuck Sheppard was second, Troy Fort was third, and Rambo fourth.

Pettigrew also won the steer wrestling title, Dave Campbell was second, Rambo was third and Ross Dollarhide was fourth. Choate Webster won the steer roping title, Dean Merritt was second, Carl Arnold was third and John

[*Turn page*]

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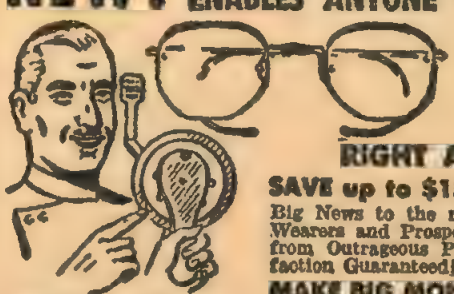

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Bowman was fourth. Jim Shoulders won the bull riding crown, Bob Maynard was second, Dave Mason was third and Kenny Madlands was fourth.

Grand Final Winners

Winners of the grand finals of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, New York, in bareback bronc riding were: First, Jim Shoulders; second, Wilbur Plougher; third, Tater Decker; fourth, Harry Tompkins; fifth, Dick Johnson.

Ross Dollarhide won the saddle bronc riding, Bill Hancock was second, Johnny Cobb was third, Gerald Roberts was fourth and Johnny Reynolds fifth.

Gerald Roberts copped the bull riding, Freckles Brown was second, Pete Crump was third, Sonny Lavender was fourth, Jim Shoulders was fifth and Harry Tompkins was sixth.

T. B. Porter was best man in the calf roping, Lefty Wilken was second, Jimmy Whaley was third, Jim Snively was fourth and Jack Shaw fifth. Bill McGuire was tops in steer wrestling, Charlie Colbert was second, James Bynum was third, Wilbur Plougher fourth, Harold Cox fifth, and Bill Lowry sixth. Harry Tompkins was the star of the wild horse races, Jack Wilkerson was second and Charlie Davis third.

Current Rodeos

Preparations were under way for some time at Tucson, Arizona, for the annual Fiesta de los Vacqueros, which was to be held February 23rd to 26th. The stock contract was let to Harley Roth, of Rapid City, South Dakota, who furnished the bucking horses, bulls and steers for steer wrestling, which he shipped from his South Dakota ranch, but the roping cattle was procured in Arizona. There was to be six contest events which were to include saddle bronc riding, bareback bronc riding, bull riding, calf roping, steer wrestling and team tying. Earl Thode, former champion cowboy who has been the arena director for a number of years, again holds the same position. This department is being prepared in advance of this show, but the event will be reported in a coming issue.

The recent Sheriff's Posse Rodeo at Roswell, New Mexico, was a nice show, produced by Beutler Brothers, with Sheriff George Wilcox as president, Lynn Beutler arena director, Monte Reger announcer, Dr. Fred C. Neal General Chairman, Una Hill and Blanche Beutler timekeepers. The results in saddle bronc riding were: First, Kid Fletcher; second, Eddie Taylor; third, Bub Evans; fourth, Sonny Linger.

Hiram Powers won the bareback bronc riding, Paul Bond was second, third and fourth were split between A. L. South and George Aldoff, fifth and sixth were split between Elliott Calhoun and Ken Kalker. Bill Ward copped the bull riding, Pete Lawhon was second. The balance of the purse in this event was divided between more than a dozen riders who were bucked off.

Troy Fort was best man in the calf roping, Leonard Huff was second, Bill Lowe was third and James Kenney was fourth. Bill Rush was tops in steer wrestling, Irwin Worthman was second, Monroe Tomlinson was third and Billy Buschbaum was fourth.

Two Big Texas Shows

Everett Colborn, manager of the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation, planned to produce two big rodeos in Texas during February. The 18th Annual Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition Rodeo and also the San Antonio Livestock Exposition Rodeo.

This latter event was San Antonio's first big stock show and rodeo in many years. A mammoth new plant and coliseum which has been built and finished within the past year is expected to be the home of a big annual stock show for years to come.

Ever since the stock show at Fort Worth Texas, back in 1917, with the staging of the first real indoor rodeo, proved that cattlemen and stock exhibitors as well as the general public in the Southwest consider rodeo tops in entertainment, the most successful stock shows have had a rodeo as the principal entertaining feature.

San Antonio should again become an excellent rodeo town or city, as it was

in this city that the late Colonel W. T. Johnson staged his first rodeo during the American Legion National Convention in 1928. Col. Johnson went on to become one of the leading rodeo producers in the United States and for a number of years was the managing director of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, New York. He also started producing the Boston Rodeo in 1931 and proved that the Bean City folk also liked the sport of the cowboy.

The Phoenix, Arizona, Jaycees have announced the dates for their annual rodeo—March 24th to 26. The Porterville, California, Orange Belt Saddle Club Rodeo will be held May 6th and 7th. Verne Elliott, of Platsville, Colorado, will produce the American Royal Rodeo in Kansas City, Missouri, May 6th to 14th.

Intercollegiate Rodeo

The first annual Intercollegiate Rodeo sponsored by the Texas A. & I. College Rodeo Club and held in conjunction with the South Texas Fair and Exposition at Kingsville, Texas, was a great success and had much to do with the increased interest in intercollegiate rodeo activities in the Lone Star state.

Among the ninety contestants, the following colleges were represented in the competition: Arlington State College, Baylor University, Hardin-Simmons University, Oklahoma A. & M. College, Sul Ross State College, Texas A. & I. College, Texas A. & M. College, Texas Technological College, University of Texas, and West Texas State College.

The King Ranch donated a two-year-old quarter horse as a prize for the all-around champion cowboy. This prize was won by Harley May of Deming, New Mexico, who is a student of the Sul Ross State College, Alpine, Texas. The Sul Ross College was also the win-

[*Turn page*]

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ning college, their representatives coming out on top in many of the events.

Well, cowhands, that is about all there is to be dished up at the old chuck wagon this trip, so we will be saying *Adios* until the next time the old rangeland cafeteria rolls around.

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOR next time we have two fine short novels to give you a double treat of reading pleasure and a change of fare. The featured novel is RIFLE BAIT, by your old friend W. C. Tuttle, author of the Tombstone and Speedy stories in our companion magazine, EXCITING WESTERN, and of more books than you can count.

If you've been reading the Tombstone and Speedy stories, or the earlier Hashknife and Sleepy stories, you know Tuttle mainly as a humorist who can keep you chuckling from the first page to the last. But the old master is a fine dramatist, too; even his humorous stories had a thread of dramatic plot that furnished plenty of excitement under the laughs. Tuttle's serious stories are tightly packed with action and salty characters who come alive as they talk.

You readers who live out West and know the rangeland and the cowboys will recognize the people and the way they talk—it's authentic and it's right.

But to get back to the story—it's the tale of a cowboy named Drifting Snow, a fiddle-footed, drifting sort of a lad, who at last drifted home to his native country of Sun Dog Valley.

A first class cowhand, they said of Drifting Snow, and a fighting fool.

"If it's fighting he wants," old Ben Taylor mused, "Sun Dog Valley is plumb full of it. You see, Driftin' came out of that valley about five, six years ago, with a bullet-hole in his neck, accused of rustling calves. His accuser promised not to sign a charge against him if he'd pull out. Driftin' couldn't prove an alibi, so he pulled. At least that's his story."

"And there was a girl," a wrinkled

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cowpoke added. "Driftin' carries her pitcher. Beautiful, too."

"Probably a pitcher of some girl up in Wyoming or Colorado or Utah, or some other foreign state. That boy got around."

"Wrong on all three counts," said the wizened one. "On the bottom of the pitcher was the name of the guy who took it and it said Tomahawk on it. That's where Driftin' is going."

To Tomahawk Drifting Snow went, to take up again the strange and unsolved mystery of his father's death and to ram his stubborn head into as bitter and savage a range war as a man's ruthless ambition could make.

You'll meet Jim Crane, the power in Sun Dog Valley and his murderous gunhawks. You'll meet the beautiful girl of the picture and people both friendly and homicidal.

By some wonderful magic of his own, Tuttle brings them all to life and when you're finished, you'll feel that for a little while, you lived the story of Drifting Snow.

That's good writing, brother!

For the second novel we have a surprise—a story called TEXAS TRAIL BOSS by Roe Richmond, one of the most sensational young Western writers to appear since the war. This is a story that packs more excitement than anything we've seen in years. It will have you breathless before you're done.

Three men came to the town of Chickasaw: young Donelson, driving a herd from Texas, Bob Gayley, the outcast and gunman returning home, and Tom Radford, the nester.

Each, in his own way and because of his own personal problems, ran afoul of old Colonel Rexford and the mighty Rex ranch. Donelson found himself cheated of his herd, Gayley made an owlhoot and Radford saw his parents broken by work and poverty because Rexford willed it so.

For each of these hot-headed young men, the cup ran over on the night they met, when Tom Radford hammered young Hi Rexford's face into the saloon floor and was backed by Donelson's and Gayley's guns.

They formed a partnership on the spot, a partnership dedicated to smash-

[*Turn page*]

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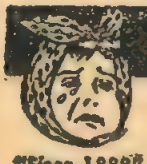

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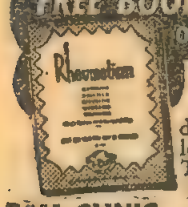

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Of course, there will also be many other fine stories and features next issue—so look forward to some splendid reading treats!

THE MAIL BAG

THE welcome mat is still out for you writing rannies to get your names in print by writing us a letter. Or a postcard, if you're short of letter paper. We like to know what you think of our stories. If you like 'em, it makes us glad. If you have a squawk we want to know what it is so we can try and do something about it. Like this gent:

> The TIDE OF EMPIRE in your January issue by Leslie Scott was a good yarn and in addition had lots of history in it. It is this intertwining of fact and fancy that makes WEST the FIRST of all magazines of its kind in my view.
>
> Every writer in his stories is but writing a diary of himself more or less. Your magazine lacks, I believe, some of the headwork as displayed by Bat Jennison. I am but one. But I like to see a writer make plans involving brains and have them worked out by men of like kind.
>
> A mere gunshot, a man down and a horse race is but trash.—*J. L. McKinstry, Blue Mountain, Miss.*

Mr. McKinstry certainly has a long memory. Bat Jennison was a character in a series of stories written by George Bruce Marquis for WEST that began running about 1926 and came to an end somewhere around 1934.

And Mr. McKinstry still remembers those stories—which just goes to show you. Probably in 1975 he'll still remember TIDE OF EMPIRE as nostalgically as he now remembers Bat Jennison.

But seriously, we doubt that the old stories were better than those we get today. We have the old files and some-

times we run back and re-read some of the old timers. Memories play you tricks. On the whole, the art of fiction writing has advanced, like most things.

Stories, of course, vary from one to another and you'll find heroes in our magazines today who go in for plenty of headwork—others who rely on guns. Remember DEEP HILLS, by L. P. Holmes? There was an intelligent story about a man who used his head and his heart as well as his guns.

Top story in January for my money was MAN RIDING WEST, by Jim Mayo. Next was SANDSTONE'S BLESSED EVENT which started slow, but wound up a howl, if you stayed with it. TIDE OF EMPIRE wasn't bad, but missed being an epic, which it was supposed to be. And at the bottom of the list, as usual, was good old Zorro, to my zorrow. Heh, heh, that's a joke son.—*Dave Hoffman, Chicago, Ill.*

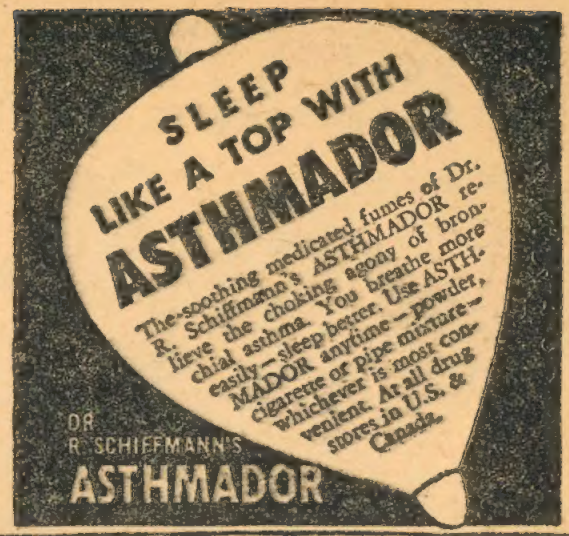
Heh, heh. Well, Mayo and Ames ought to be pleased anyway. Curious thing about those two, they're both top cowhands, born and bred in the West. Maybe that's got something to do with it, but then, so are Leslie Scott and Johnston McCulley Westerners, so there goes that theory. Anyway, Dave, we'll see what we can do about getting you some more Mayo and Ames.

TIDE OF EMPIRE was good, but didn't measure up to THE RIDER OF THE RUBY HILLS. That was my idea of a story! Had me on the edge of my chair all the way.—*John Woody, Elmira, N. Y.*

Another Mayo booster. Seems like the man has some friends here and about. RIDER OF THE RUBY HILLS was a corking good story, all right, and I trust you also enjoyed MAN RIDING WEST in the January issue.

So friends. We've enjoyed reading your letters and having this little palaver with you. Thanks, everybody—and do write us again. Every letter received is given our personal attention and consideration whether or not it is quoted in this department. Please address your letters and postcards to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And in the meantime—happy reading!

—THE EDITOR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